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**“Is it time we move through or space?”:  
Literary Anachronism and Anachorism  
in the Novels of Elizabeth Taylor**

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## Abstract

### **“Is it time we move through or space?”: Literary Anachronism and Anachorism in the Novels of Elizabeth Taylor**

This thesis examines Elizabeth Taylor’s twelve novels through the lens of the interlinked concepts, *anachronism* and *anachorism*, an approach that enables an analysis of the structural, thematic and stylistic engagements with time and place in her fiction. Blending theme with chronology, the study attaches a particular topic to each decade between the 1940s and the 1970s: war and its aftermath are considered in Taylor’s 1940s novels; the servant-figure in those of the 1950s; feminine constructs in the 1960s; and death and dying in the 1970s. The study argues that while Taylor’s texts look back to previous literary periods and, increasingly, to earlier parts of the century, they simultaneously speak to their particular historical moment.

The thesis contributes to recent scholarship that has sought to reappraise the fiction of neglected mid-twentieth-century writers, uncovering an altogether more innovative and complex fictive form than previously recognised. Taylor’s oeuvre is positioned firmly within this more nuanced and complicated literary landscape. Anachronism and anachorism frame and shape an analysis of those aspects within the structure and content of Taylor’s novels that are unexpected, out of place even, within the genre of domestic fiction. To facilitate the analysis, the study introduces the metaphor of ‘the scalpel within the kid glove’, which points both to the way Taylor writes and to a way of reading her. The distinct contribution the thesis makes to current scholarship is to demonstrate that Taylor’s novels are altogether more strange, more angry, more political and more philosophical than generally acknowledged. They destabilise reader expectation even as they disrupt the conventions of realist fiction. Taylor emerges as an ‘after-modernist’, a classification that exhibits both temporal and aesthetic qualities, signalling a writer engaged with the after-effects of war, while at the same time in conversation with the legacy of modernist poetics.

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## Note on Citations

Novels by Elizabeth Taylor are cited with abbreviated titles as listed below, and enclosed in brackets alongside the relevant page numbers, for example (AML, 241). Full publication details can be found in the Bibliography.

AML *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945)

ANG *Angel* (1957)

AVH *A View of the Harbour* (1947)

AWR *A Wreath of Roses* (1949)

BLA *Blaming* (1976)

GHS *A Game of Hide and Seek* (1951)

ISS *In a Summer Season* (1961)

MPC *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* (1971)

PAL *Palladian* (1946)

TSB *The Sleeping Beauty* (1953)

TSK *The Soul of Kindness* (1964)

TWG *The Wedding Group* (1968)

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## Introduction

The wet fields were dealt out one after another for Cassandra's benefit. She sat with her back to the engine (as Mrs Turner had seen her off), with *The Classical Tradition* and a pile of sandwiches wrapped in a stiff damask napkin on her lap. Sodden cattle stood facing north, or hunched under hedges in the drizzle. The train ripped through the sullen landscape like scissors through calico; each time it veered round westwards rain hit the window in long slashes. 'Is it time we move through or space?' Cassandra wondered, lulled by the sequence of the English Landscape – the backs of houses and sheds, fields, a canal with barges, brickworks, plantations, the little lane going down under the bridge, fields, the backs of houses. Then the wet blackness of stations, sidings, the jagged edge of shelters beneath which people stood bleakly with luggage, and sometimes children, awaiting trains.

*The Classical Tradition* had a strange fungus smell and its pages were stippled with moles. The prose was formal and exact, [...] and yielded up nothing between the lines, so Cassandra clicked open her little case and brought out *The Woman in White*. (PAL, 15)

In the second chapter of *Palladian* (1946), the young orphan, Cassandra Dashwood, travels by train to take up a post as governess in a decaying country house. 'Is it time we move through or space?', reflects Cassandra. The answer, of course, is both. Though she is travelling forwards in space, she is in a sense travelling backwards in time, to the era of the governess, an occupation already long-past, old-fashioned, by the mid-1940s. Just as Cassandra's question signals an ambivalence surrounding the novel's temporal and spatial framing, so it points to the interconnectedness of these two concepts.

Mikhail Bakhtin examines this interconnectedness in his late-1930s essay, 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', attaching the term '*chronotope*, (literally "time-space") to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.'<sup>1</sup> In Bakhtin's theory of meaning in narrative, the chronotope becomes the basis for distinguishing literary genres according to their characteristics and specific space-time ratios. My use of time and space/place in an analysis of Elizabeth Taylor's fiction is somewhat different but no less significant: while acknowledging their inseparability, my particular concern is with notions of *out of time* and *out of place*. Through an examination of the structural, thematic and stylistic engagements with these twinned concepts, this study contributes to an ongoing critical reappraisal of Taylor's novels, and to a rethinking of her place within the mid-twentieth-century literary landscape.

*Palladian's* setting is a lugubrious, anonymous landscape – 'wet fields', 'wet blackness', 'sodden cattle', 'drizzle', 'sullen landscape'. To escape reality, Cassandra turns to literature, not to *The Classical Tradition*, however, a fusty work of non-fiction, but to the altogether more entertaining novelistic form, *The Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins. When serialised in 1859 this text was arguably the first 'sensation' novel, a genre noted for its themes of murder and mystery, jealousy and adultery. With the exception of murder, all feature in *Palladian*, including a moment of high melodrama when Cassandra's charge is flattened by falling masonry. *Palladian's* opening line foregrounds its preoccupation with the novel as a form, and with the powerful

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<sup>1</sup> M. M. Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination : Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). p. 84.



effect it can have on the reader: 'Cassandra, with all her novel-reading, could be sure of experiencing the proper emotions' (PAL, 5). Her name looks back to both a literary and mythological past – to Jane Austen's sister, Cassandra, and to her novel, *Sense and Sensibility*, but also to the princess of Greek mythology blessed and yet cursed with the gift of prophecy. On first meeting her melancholic employer, Cassandra prophesies: 'He will do to fall in love with' (PAL, 38). Given her name and the text's reimagining of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, marriage to her employer is assured.

*Palladian* is a novel steeped in its literary past, and the well-read reader undoubtedly enjoys identifying its numerous implicit and explicit nineteenth-century intertexts, most notably *Jane Eyre*, but also *Northanger Abbey*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Middlemarch*. The twentieth century does not entirely escape, however, most particularly in the novel's many allusions to Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca*, itself a retelling of *Jane Eyre*. The anachronistic quality inherent in a text that continually orientates towards an earlier fictive age is underscored in the passage by its repetitive use of 'back': Cassandra sits with 'her back to the engine', the phrase 'the backs of houses' is repeated. The trope of 'back' is a key concern within this thesis. Furthermore, with its descriptions of an unspecified, repetitive landscape, *Palladian* offers few clues to spatial location – the novel is as out of place as it is out of time. By facing backwards Cassandra sees where she has come from, temporally and spatially, but not where she is going, thereby negating the prophetic quality of her name. Moreover, the action of facing backwards anticipates something that can be observed in both the form and content of

Taylor's novels after the 1940s: becoming evermore locked in their temporal moment, they look back to earlier times, but rarely forwards.

The sense of the novel not quite fitting its time is underlined in a conversation between Cassandra and a fellow traveller:

“Governess, eh!” the woman repeated, smiling comfortingly. The word had not seemed old-fashioned to Cassandra before. For the first time, she took a glance from outside at all it might imply. She was setting out with nothing to commend her to such a profession, beyond the fact of her school lessons being fresh still in her mind and, along with that, a very proper willingness to fall in love, the more despairingly the better, with her employer. (PAL, 17)

The ‘old-fashionedness’ of a text that invokes the theme of *Jane Eyre* so transparently could not be more plainly signalled. Though Cassandra has not until now seen the post of governess as old-fashioned, the idea has been introduced earlier when a pupil at Cassandra’s old school comments: “What a corny sort of job” (PAL, 11). As well as old-fashioned, ‘corny’ can mean hackneyed and sentimental, and might fittingly be applied to elements of *Palladian’s* melodramatic plot. As Paul Bailey observes, Taylor ‘is quite shameless in the way she adheres to the formulae of romantic tosh’ in the novel.<sup>2</sup>

*Palladian’s* temporal location is vague: despite its 1946 publication, it contains no mention of war, no commentary on the privations of wartime Britain. Indeed, reference to the 1940 film, *Pride and Prejudice* (Austen

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Bailey, Introduction to Elizabeth Taylor, *Palladian*, Virago Modern Classics (London: Virago, 1985). p. viii.

again), is a rare clue to period. By positioning *Palladian* in an indeterminate time and place, and playfully introducing a plethora of anachronistic literary intertexts, Taylor draws attention to the fictionality of her text, disturbing both its domestic realist framing and reader expectation. The text in fact performs Cassandra's 'glancing from outside', self-consciously examining the effect on the narrative flow of its own backward-facing 'outdatedness'. My contention is that this preoccupation with problematising time is not limited to *Palladian*; the studied collapsing of past and present is just one example of a literary anachronism that recurs in different ways across her writing, framing and shaping her work. I am here using 'anachronism' in the sense of being 'out of harmony with the present', from the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition.<sup>3</sup> One of this study's chief concerns is with how the notion of being both in and out of harmony with the present allows us to think again about Taylor's fiction and, indeed, the writer herself.

That the fellow-traveller smiles 'comfortingly' at the word governess, mirrors the feelings of pleasure and reassurance experienced by readers of the more nostalgic, 'comforting' forms of conventional domestic fiction, by writers such as Monica Dickens, Angela Thirkell and Barbara Pym, for example – not

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<sup>3</sup> Anachronism: '1. An error in computing time, or fixing dates; the erroneous reference of an event, circumstance, or custom to a wrong date. 2. Anything done or existing out of date; hence, anything which was proper to a former age, but is, or, if it existed, would be out of harmony with the present.' *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Vol. 1, prepared by J.A. Simpson and E.S.C. Weiner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). Anachronistic poetics, in terms of a character, scene, or incident being out of harmony with narrative time, has been part of mainstream literary poetics since at least the time of Shakespeare. A notable dramatic example is Shakespeare's reference to a striking clock in *Julius Caesar*.

*Palladian* however, nor indeed *Jane Eyre*.<sup>4</sup> As Erica Brown observes, *Palladian*'s 'imagined world is a nightmare rather than a comforting fantasy.'<sup>5</sup> For, amongst the quotidian elements of train-travel described in the first extract we find incongruously violent images that anticipate a strangeness to come: the 'train *ripped* through the sullen landscape like *scissors* through calico', 'rain hit the window in long *slashes*.' Station shelters have *jagged* edges. While such sharp, frenzied images may seem out of place in many novels of domestic realism, they are central to Taylor's oeuvre. Indeed, in a 2012 interview, Rebecca Abrams perceptively remarked that Taylor wrote with 'a kid glove and a scalpel'.<sup>6</sup>

This juxtaposition of two wholly incompatible objects foregrounds succinctly the contradictions inherent in Taylor's fiction, serving as a powerful metaphor for a way to read her novels, and, indeed, for 'reading' both the private and public woman herself. The kid glove suggests qualities such as feminine, sophisticated, middle class, conservative, pointing to those elements of Taylor's fiction that appear to conform to the conventions of an essentially feminine form of domestic realism. The scalpel, on the other hand, symbolises all that slices through, undercuts, these more traditional elements, to further Taylor's stated aim of exposing 'the strangeness in everyday people'.<sup>7</sup> And it is not only her characters that her literary scalpel

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<sup>4</sup> Nicola Humble writes extensively on such domestic fiction in Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s : Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Erica Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel : Elizabeth Von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor* (Vermont, USA: Pickering & Chatto Ltd, 2013). p. 78.

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Abrams in *A Good Read*, BBC Radio 4, broadcast 8 February 2012.

<sup>7</sup> From a letter from Taylor to Blanche Knopf, 14 October 1948, reproduced in N. H. Reeve, ed. *Elizabeth Taylor: A Centenary Celebration* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). p. 99.

exposes: it is employed stylistically to defamiliarize the text itself, allowing the attentive reader to detect an anger and strangeness between the textual crevices.<sup>8</sup> The following scene from *Palladian* illustrates Taylor's ability to wield her scalpel-like pen, performing the very act she is depicting:

[Tom] lived at two levels, the life in the saloon bar; the life with the pen in his hand and the cynical, bitter, unamiable figures growing upon the endless pieces of paper – the harlot stripped of flesh but with eye-sockets coquettish above an opened fan, or the young man with his heart lying in his outstretched hand, but a heart from a medical book, with severed pipes and labelled auricles and ventricles, nothing romantic, nothing valentineish. (PAL, 45)

There is little romantic about *Palladian*, despite its notional compliance with the conventions of the romance narrative. And as the narrator suggests, there is certainly nothing romantic about these angry, brutal drawings of a flayed prostitute, flirtatious eye-sockets and a dissected heart lying in its owner's hand. The adjective 'valentineish' summons romantic visions of red hearts adorning greetings cards, and sits uneasily within this scene of near-gothic horror – unless of course the image also points to the St Valentine's Day massacre on the streets of Chicago in 1929. The passage, with its images as ugly as they are violent, foregrounds Taylor's preoccupation with the visceral. Indeed, it could almost be a macabre metaphor for her own literary impulse. As Neil Reeve remarks of *Palladian* in general, 'it is as if Poe had collided with Compton-Burnett: romantic grotesque crossed with classic precision'.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The concept of 'defamiliarization' is expounded by the Russian formalist critic, Victor Shklovsky in his essay 'Art as Technique' (1917).

<sup>9</sup> N. H. Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor, Writers and Their Work* (Tavistock: Northcote House in association with the British Council, 2008). pp. 32-33.

It is my contention that this vein of darkness, anger and cruelty is not limited to this novel. Instead, it is an example of an ‘out-of-placeness’ – ‘anachorism’ – that runs through all Taylor’s fiction, and which until comparatively recently has been largely neglected in critical studies.<sup>10</sup> ‘Anachorism’ is defined by the *OED* as ‘something out of place in, or foreign to, the country’.<sup>11</sup> To parallel my use of anachronism, I use ‘anachorism’ in the sense of being ‘out of harmony with place’. The strange images in this passage are an example of what I mean by anachorism: they do not fit comfortably within conventional domestic fiction; furthermore, they disturb the novel’s realist credentials. At once a simple and a complex concept, ‘place’ contains an obvious spatial quality, but also a phenomenological one, a way of experiencing the world. To give a thematic example, Cassandra, relocated from a familiar urban environment to an alien pastoral setting, to take up a post for which she is unprepared, in a home in which she feels an outsider, exhibits both forms of ‘being out of harmony with place’.

Before leaving *Palladian* I want to draw attention to one further scene to exemplify how Taylor uses ‘out-of-placeness’ to disrupt both form and reader expectation. While the novel’s many intertexts might indicate a ‘happily-ever-after’ dénouement following the marriage of the governess-figure to her

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<sup>10</sup> Exceptions include Rosemary Dinnage, "The Tick of Blood in the Wrist," *Times Literary Supplement* 10 September 1976.; Philip Hensher, "The Other Liz Taylor " *Telegraph* (9 April 2006), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3651494/The-other-Liz-Taylor.html#>; N. H. Reeve, "Elizabeth Taylor (1912-1975)," *The Literary Encyclopedia* (10 October 2006). Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*; Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel: Elizabeth Von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor*.

<sup>11</sup> The *OED* cites J R Lowell, *Biglow Papers* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ser. 55, 1862: ‘Opinions [that are] anachronisms and anachorisms, foreign both to the age and the country.’ It is a term used in Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). p. 102-104. I understand literary anachorism to mean the insertion, either accidentally or intentionally, of a character, scene or incident into a place where it does not belong.

effete employer, the text clearly refuses the romance plot. As the newly-weds enter the increasingly disintegrating Palladian house:

only a lop-sided hen was left to enliven the façade [...] The hen pecked between the cracks of the terrace paving stones and wandered into the hall. But as the dark shadows of indoors fell coldly across it like a knife, it turned and tottered back into the sunshine. (PAL, 192)

These lines underscore with great economy the ambiguity and peculiarity of the novel's conclusion, qualities that can be ascribed to the endings of many of Taylor's novels. Even the hen, a symbol of rural domesticity, is shown to be 'lop-sided', unbalanced, unsettled. By invoking ominous images of darkness, coldness and cutting (another scalpel-like image), the text envisages the couple's future as uncertain at best, deeply troubling at worst. A more hopeful prospect, in the form of light and warmth, appears viable only outside the house, and perhaps outside their marriage. Moreover, the hen pecking between the cracks, ripping out what it finds there, might be another violent representation of Taylor's creative method. In the passage that opens this Introduction, Cassandra puts aside *The Classical Tradition* because it 'yield[s] up nothing between the lines'. As I demonstrate, however, such a metaphor is altogether too tame for the way Taylor writes, and, indeed, for a way to read her work.

By paying attention to all that is anachronistic and anachoristic in *Palladian* the reader is urged to rethink the novel. Even as it invites us to read in one way, that is, for the pleasure of the reading experience (what we might call 'the kid-glove' effect), it demands to be read in a way that is less comfortable,

more disquieting ('the scalpel' effect), forcing us to turn back and confront its strangeness, anger and cruelty. To accommodate these seemingly 'out-of-time-and-place' elements, Taylor troubles the novel's domestic realist framing, blurring the borders with more experimental fictive forms.

## II

Revisionary works from the 1990s onwards have attained the historical distance to return to and re-examine the neglected fiction of the mid-twentieth century, not least the fiction published in the immediate postwar period, and are discovering a more compelling and multifaceted literary history than previously acknowledged.<sup>12</sup> Such studies supply a much-deserved afterlife to many nearly-forgotten writers. A number of these works focus primarily on fiction's engagement with socio-cultural change in mid-century society, for example Niamh Baker's *Happily Ever After?: Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain, 1945-1960* and Elizabeth Maslen's *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-1968*. This thesis, however, is as much concerned with form, style and language as it is with historical

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<sup>12</sup> For reassessments of the literary period see, for example, Niamh Baker, *Happily Ever After?: Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain, 1945-1960* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); Jenny Hartley, *Millions Like Us : British Women's Fiction of the Second World War* (London: Virago, 1997); Clare Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions : The "Woman's Novel" in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s : Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*; Kristin Bluemel, ed. *Intermodernism : Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009). John Brannigan, *Orwell to the Present : Literature in England, 1945-2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2003); Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction : Realism and After* (London: Edward Arnold, 1995); Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge, eds., *British Fiction after Modernism : The Novel at Mid-Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Elizabeth Maslen, *Political and Social Issues in British Women's Fiction, 1928-1968* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War : 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009); N. H. Reeve and Rod Mengham, eds., *The Fiction of the 1940s : Stories of Survival* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001); Sara Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War : Dark London* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Jane Dowson, ed. *Women's Writing, 1945-60 : After the Deluge* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).



context, and thus contributes to a more complicated and nuanced conversation surrounding mid-century writers and their works. Indeed, it challenges the reductive opinion, held widely until comparatively recently, that Taylor simply created a popular, successful and deftly-written form of domestic fiction that was as amusing as it was affecting in its ruthless dissection of troubled middle-class relationships.<sup>13</sup> My approach to reading Taylor's novels enables those parts that seem out of place within the genre of domestic realist fiction to be fully examined.

The question of how to read Taylor's fiction has, in the last decade, preoccupied a number of scholars of Taylor's work, notably Neil Reeve and Erica Brown, both of whom offer fresh perspectives that chime with my own approach. Reeve, for example, argues that Taylor's writing 'is clearly driven by something much fiercer and more primal than its undemonstrative surface would suggest.'<sup>14</sup> And Erica Brown observes in her study of Taylor and Elizabeth von Arnim, that 'these novels are [...] remarkably dark, complex and challenging [...] their message is not straightforward, and neither is their form straightforwardly realist.'<sup>15</sup> As demonstrated in the discussion of *Palladian* above, by reading Taylor's novels through the lens of my framing concepts, the scalpel is exposed within the kid glove. This study argues for the reader to turn back and approach Taylor's writing anew. 'Life is strange wherever we uncover it', observes Taylor, 'and I should like to show the

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Florence Leclercq, *Elizabeth Taylor* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1985); Paula M. Vadeboncoeur, "The Novels of Elizabeth Taylor" (The University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1976 (Unpublished doctoral thesis)).

<sup>14</sup> Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel : Elizabeth Von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor*. pp. 2-3.

strangeness in everyday people, to do justice to them, to describe their lives passing'.<sup>16</sup>

### III

On occasion Taylor's ambivalent approach to literary temporality appears unintentional, stemming more from the particularities of her personal history than from any sense of nostalgia for a lost past. Her adult life was stained by the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War. That she also passed her entire writing life in the shadow of the Cold War may explain why war was ever-present to her, and indeed to a number of her writer contemporaries. Furthermore, the Labour-voting Taylor was in many ways out of harmony with the middle-class world she inhabited, and with the London-centric literary community that held sway during her writing life. Temporally and spatially, therefore – and indeed emotionally, politically and philosophically – Taylor did not quite fit. And at some point in the 1950s, her fiction also ceased to fit. Where her 1940s novels have a contemporary feel, speaking clearly to their times, a thematic 'old-fashionedness' begins to creep into Taylor's fiction during the 1950s, adding to the strangeness always present in her fiction.

Towards the end of the decade Taylor becomes marooned in her historical moment, never quite escaping the climate of war, unable to realise within her fiction the degree of social change that surrounded her, unable or unwilling to imagine the literary future. When English society was in an acute state of

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<sup>16</sup> From a letter from Taylor to Blanche Knopf, 14 October 1948, reproduced in Reeve, ed. *Elizabeth Taylor: A Centenary Celebration*. p.99.

flux, Taylor's domestic spaces continue to embrace the anachronistic loyal servant. And even as Taylor offers a fierce critique of woman's unenviable position in society at mid-century, she fails to imagine alternative lives for her female characters. Approaching sixty, Taylor was asked her thoughts on 'Women's Lib': 'It all seems so vague. I'd have been a suffragette but that was different and I think all professions should be open to women –'.<sup>17</sup> In the same interview she observes that 'I used to write about young girls – I don't think I could do that any more.'<sup>18</sup> It is indicative that the figure of the suffragette appears repeatedly in her fiction: while Taylor could look back to the politics of first-wave feminism, she could not so easily envision the social imperatives of the burgeoning second-wave movement.

During the 1950s a new form of social realism emerged onto the literary scene. While still located largely within the domestic, it spoke to the decade's mood of restlessness and social upheaval, exemplified by Kingsley Amis's 1954 novel, *Lucky Jim*. A spirit of rebellion and alienation seeped into the traditional realist novel, producing a fiction that fled middle-class London and its wealthy home counties for fresh regional and cultural landscapes, bent on challenging the prevailing societal norms. The disparate writers of such works, those who wrote largely from a lower-middle-class or working-class perspective, came to be known collectively and somewhat reluctantly as the 'Angry Young Men'.<sup>19</sup> Against this rising literary tradition, and the

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<sup>17</sup> This interview by 'Taurus' appeared in the *Bucks Free Press*, 17 March 1971, and is included in Joanna Kingham's introduction to Elizabeth Taylor, *A Dedicated Man, and Other Stories* (London: Virago, 1993). (unnumbered pages)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> John Braine's *Room at the Top* (1957), Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), and Stan Barstow's *A Kind of Loving* (1960) epitomised this evolving fictive form.

emergence of new forms of experimental fiction such as the *nouveau roman*, Taylor's novels began to appear out of touch, out of place, out of time. Indeed, according to her biographer, Nicola Beauman, by 1961 a number of English reviewers had become evermore critical of Taylor's middle-class, middle-England domestic themes. Beauman quotes Richard Mayne of the *New Statesman* as expressing 'a brutish dislike for gracious upper-middle-class charm, at least in novels'.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, the anachronistic writer, Ivy Compton-Burnett, avoided such criticism: never in time, Compton-Burnett could not be accused of being out of it. Her remarkably odd novels never escape an uncertain Edwardian era however late in the twentieth century they are written, and have always been praised for their originality, theatricality, strange dialogue and wit.<sup>21</sup>

Yet despite ambivalent reviews and Taylor's continuing failure to gain even a foothold on the precarious slopes of the literary canon, her fiction remained reasonably popular and successful well into the 1970s. Over a dozen of her short stories and at least five of her novels were broadcast by the BBC between the 1940s and 1970s. Furthermore, her 1971 novel, *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont*, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. That it would not win, however, was inevitable once Saul Bellow, one of the judges, concluded: 'I

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For a discussion on the novel between 1945 and 1960 see, for example, Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern British Novel* (London: Penguin, 1994). pp. 264-334.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Mayne, *New Statesman*, 28 April 1961. Beauman also quotes from a *Guardian* review: 'save me ... from the wise, witty, sensitive, accomplished, charming female novelist', Norman Shrapnel, 28 April 1961, in Nicola Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*, Persephone Life (London: Persephone, 2009). p. 335.

<sup>21</sup> In 1956 Nathalie Sarraute judged Compton-Burnett 'one of the greatest novelists that England has ever had.' Nathalie Sarraute, "Conversation and Sub-Conversation," in Charles Burkhardt, *The Art of I. Compton-Burnett: A Collection of Critical Essays* (London: Gollancz, 1972). p. 154.

seem to hear the tinkle of tea cups'.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, Taylor's oeuvre has always attracted what Benjamin Schwarz terms a 'coterie of devotees', describing her wryly as 'best known for not being better known'.<sup>23</sup> Paradoxically, both her popularity with the general reading public and the readability of her fiction counted against her in many academic circles, during and after her lifetime. Writing in 1978, Robin Grove observes: 'She appears to have achieved virtual invisibility, by giving her novels the look of simple entertainment, which enables them to pass through the critical arena without comment'.<sup>24</sup>

#### IV

If Taylor's fiction appears at times unintentionally out of harmony with its time and place, at other times she knowingly injects anachronistic and anachoristic elements into her novels, as I have shown. To aid my investigation into these not-quite-fitting elements, a further critical concept is added to my methodological frame, prompted by Elizabeth Bowen's 1951 essay 'The Bend Back'.<sup>25</sup> This is the notion of the 'return' or the 'turn back', already an intrinsic part of the initial two concepts in their prefix 'ana', meaning 'back' or 're-'. The 'return' is a major formalising concept in this study, not least in a postwar context. Taylor is not alone in invoking in her

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<sup>22</sup> Saul Bellow's comment was revealed to Beauman in conversation with the Booker Prize judge, John Gross, 11 October 2006, in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. pp. 369-370.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Schwarz, "The Other Elizabeth Taylor," (20 July 2007), <[www.theatlantic.com/doc/200709/editors-choice](http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200709/editors-choice)>. Taylor, however, would surely have despaired of the condescending tone adopted by some of the 'devotees' who have written introductions to Virago's editions of her novels. For example, Charlotte Mendelson, in her introduction to the 2010 edition of *The Wedding Group*, begins: 'Poor Elizabeth Taylor', going on to lament her 'semi-obscurity'. p. vii.

<sup>24</sup> Robin Grove, "From the Island: Elizabeth Taylor's Novels," *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 11:2(Fall, 1978). p. 79.

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, "The Bend Back," in *The Mulberry Tree : Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Hermione Lee (London: Virago, 1986).

1940s novels the trope of the return or turn back. Henry Green's 1946 novel, *Back*, for example, centres on a disabled soldier's return from a German prison camp to a bomb-damaged England where his already fragile grip on reality unravels still further.<sup>26</sup> Taylor performs the return in numerous ways: she returns to earlier literary traditions to destabilise her version of domestic realism; she looks back to the poetics of her predecessors to perfect her own literary style. And structurally and thematically her novels enact the return in their very circularity: narrative ends frequently suggest a return to the beginning, one that is necessarily altered by the first reading.

That Taylor's oeuvre does not always fit its time and place, presents problems for those who wish to position it, not least the literary establishment, past and present. From the publication of her first novel to the present day, her work has been considered at once 'popular' and 'serious', 'middlebrow' and occasionally 'highbrow'. While her fiction is ambivalently 'in and out' of traditional realism, it could not be termed experimental. As with many of Taylor's mid-century contemporaries including Elizabeth Bowen, Patrick Hamilton, Graham Greene and Henry Green, she has been difficult to place, until a revived interest in mid-century fiction has created new scholarly contexts that centre on categories such as 'middlebrow', 'late modernist' and 'intermodernist'.

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<sup>26</sup> Peter Boxall explores the tradition of 'the back' in Irish writing – 'the back door, the back room, the back road' – which, he argues, links writers as diverse as Maria Edgeworth, Bowen, Beckett and John Banville. See Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett : Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism*, Continuum Literary Studies Series (London: Continuum, 2009). pp. 21-37.

Key to any literary positioning is an understanding of how Taylor should be read, a question I address in Chapter 1. In analysing reader experience, a number of theorists formulate literary dualities that attempt to distinguish between the 'popular' and 'serious', the straightforward and the more complex text. For example, Roland Barthes introduces 'readerly' [*lisible*] and 'writerly' [*scriptible*] texts, neologisms he coins in his 1970 work, *S/Z*, informed by the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure.<sup>27</sup> He later explores notions of textual 'pleasure' and 'bliss' in his 1973 work, *The Pleasure of the Text*.<sup>28</sup> Hilary Radner chooses to divide texts into 'hysterical' and 'obsessional', after Freud.<sup>29</sup> While informed by these literary theorists, this study's approach is somewhat different: my reading of Taylor suggests that her fiction resists attempts to be defined in terms of binary oppositions, and in the chapter, I return to and elaborate upon the metaphor of 'the scalpel within the kid glove'.

V

Taylor's twelve novels span four decades of evolving social, political, cultural and literary history from the 1940s to the 1970s, and the study approaches them thematically and chronologically, attaching a particular theme to each decade. Such an organising structure enables me to consider a group of thematically and socio-historically linked texts which, when examined closely, can be shown to unsettle the assumptions of that socio-historical moment.

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<sup>27</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

<sup>29</sup> Hilary Radner, "Extra-Curricular Activities: Women Writers and the Readerly Text," in *Women's Writing in Exile*, ed. Mary Lynn Broe and Angela J. C. Ingram (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

Furthermore, the structure facilitates an exploration of what Taylor terms ‘the strangeness in everyday people’, and indeed, the strangeness within her fiction as a whole. In her 1969 memoir of Compton-Burnett, Taylor writes that Compton-Burnett ‘never leaves the strangeness out’.<sup>30</sup> She might be writing of herself. Inevitably the boundaries between decades and chapters can only ever be fluid and permeable: the fear, anger, uncertainty and death that saturate Taylor’s 1970s texts, for example, look back to her novels of the 1940s. Moreover, Taylor’s central themes of isolation, disappointment and self-delusion weave their way through everything she writes. Just as there is more to ‘Elizabeth Taylor’ than appears at first sight, so there is more to her fiction than may be fully appreciated at first reading.

Though my twinned concepts are always interlinked, their relative importance shifts in different chapters. In Chapter 1 they shape an analysis of Taylor’s private and literary worlds, her literary poetics and literary positioning. Taylor was anachoristically located both within her domestic life and within the mid-century literary world, and the difficulties that flowed from being at once in and out of place are explored. Attention then shifts to my second framing concept, anachronism, as I return to *Palladian* for a discussion of Taylor’s literary poetics. Finally, in an attempt to classify the near-unclassifiable, a new literary category is proposed, one that seeks to circumscribe more effectively Taylor’s oeuvre: my proposal is ‘after-modernists’, after the title of Marina MacKay’s and Lyndsey Stonebridge’s 2007 collection, *British Fiction*

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<sup>30</sup> Elizabeth Taylor, "Memoir of Ivy Compton-Burnett," in *Elizabeth Taylor: A Centenary Celebration*, ed. N H Reeve (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). p. 74.



*after Modernism*.<sup>31</sup> 'After-modernism' displays both temporal and poetic qualities: temporally, 'after' gestures towards 'aftermath' or 'aftershocks', suggesting a period dominated by war, a central literary concern of the time; and poetically, 'after-modernists' can be understood to engage with the legacy of modernism in the sense of 'coming after', 'influenced by' or 'echoing'.

Chapter 2 approaches Taylor's novels of the 1940s through the prism of my framing concepts to examine how the Second World War is inscribed in these texts. My readings suggest that in three of her four novels war and its after-effects, in particular its ugly brutality, are ever-present. A dark postwar mood of spying, neglect, dreariness and fatigue infuses these texts, and fear is all-pervasive. *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945) is haunted by disquieting gothic tropes that play to its anachronistic Brontë intertexts. Disquieting too are the uncanny scenes that trouble *A View of The Harbour* (1947). To interpret such elements, I turn to Freud's *The Uncanny* and its discourse on the 'homely' and 'unhomely', a text that also helps to elucidate a series of anachoristic subtexts in *At Mrs Lippincote's*.<sup>32</sup> Anachoristic scenes of violence and horror penetrate Taylor's final 1940s novel, *A Wreath of Roses* (1949). Articulated through her painter-figure, Taylor sets up a furious discourse on the irreconcilable dialectic between art and life: whether or not the creative artist should respond to apocalyptic events. Anger at Nazi barbarity pierces these narratives, deforming their realist domestic frames,

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<sup>31</sup> MacKay and Stonebridge, eds., *British Fiction after Modernism : The Novel at Mid-Century*.

<sup>32</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock and Hugh Haughton, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin, 2003).

and while its source can be traced back to Taylor's experiences in the 1930s, I suggest that an intellectual engagement with anger is present in all her fiction. Taylor's second novel, however, does not fit thematically with the other three; its allusions to war are few. Why Taylor turns her back on war in this novel just as peace is finally restored is considered in relation to Bowen's 'The Bend Back', which argues that a postwar dreariness may have fuelled contemporary writers' retreat from the present towards a nostalgic illusion of the past. Deconstructing such a response, the essay urges writers to examine their own time 'for some gold vein'.<sup>33</sup>

In the next chapter my focus turns from war to an examination of Taylor's increasingly anachronistic literary servants. Chapter 3 first positions the domestic servant in its historical and literary contexts, before addressing the following questions: how does Taylor write the mid-twentieth-century literary servant, and to what use is this figure put when positioned ambivalently in and out of time and place? While domestic servants pepper Taylor's novels from first to last, the concern of this chapter is with the 1950s, a decade that witnessed major transformations in domestic life, not least a steep decline in the practice of employing servants. Her first 1950s novel, *A Game of Hide and Seek* (1951), inhabits two temporal settings. Its later section features a foreign maid and a self-styled 'lady cleaner', who perform the narratorial function of telling war's legacy, commenting on changing times. Unlike these servants, the trio of 'sales ladies' introduced in the earlier section are very much 'in time', though just an historical step away from being domestic

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<sup>33</sup> Bowen, "The Bend Back." p. 60.

servants. Relocated to a 1930s 'gown shop', their erstwhile below-stairs world transformed into a tea-room, these figures are deployed in part to celebrate the intimacy of female friendship.

*The Sleeping Beauty* (1953), with its anachronistic fairytale framing, is a novel filled with doublings and unsettling awakenings. The burgeoning romance of the nursery-maid figure mirrors that of the 'fairytale' protagonist, and the servant's textual role is both to provide a benchmark of ordinariness against which to measure the odd 'royal' couple, and to serve as a vehicle for an examination of class and snobbery. A similar task is given to the eccentric figure of the chauffeur in Taylor's only historical novel, *Angel* (1957). As liminal figures, Taylor's literary servants are in an unrivalled position to shine a lower-class light on a middle-class world. Furthermore, they are well-placed to provide commentaries on the historical and political changes wrought in English society in the aftermath of war, becoming servants *of* the text, as well as *in* the text. Taylor's anachronistic and increasingly anachronistic servant-figure is thus given a textual authority that belies its inferior position, both in the sense of being a marginal character and of lowly status.

The concept of anachronism is privileged in the next chapter, as attention shifts to the 1960s and an analysis of Taylor's fictive women. Chapter 4 argues that, while Taylor's women may be judged increasingly out of harmony with their time, they in fact speak to their historical moment. I examine whether there is a sense in which Taylor's novels might be

considered feminist; that is, whether they could be understood to challenge the prevailing norms of society; and if so, whether we could class Taylor herself as a feminist writer. As Britain emerged from an age of austerity, it witnessed widespread political and cultural turbulence, from which grew the seeds of the women's movement. During this decade Taylor published three novels: *In a Summer Season* (1961), *The Soul of Kindness* (1964) and *The Wedding Group* (1968). The first of these was written and set in the late 1950s, positioned between Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Betty Friedan's early second-wave feminist text, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). It is to de Beauvoir's ground-breaking text that I turn for my theoretical underpinning: its critique of the social construction of gender, together with its stress on women's equality and fulfilment in a man's world, dominated feminist theory and practice at mid-century. It is my contention that Taylor's 1960s novels actively engage with *The Second Sex* in their dramatisations of a number of de Beauvoir's feminine constructs. Mixing the political and personal, Taylor smuggles an existential discourse between the pages of her seemingly uncontroversial fiction, thus knowingly engaging in literary consciousness-raising. That these texts cannot progress very far beyond dramatising women's dilemma, however, is addressed in the chapter.

The final chapter examines the subject of endings and death in Taylor's 1970s novels. Just as the century was moulded by violence and death, so too was Taylor's literary imagination. Indeed, her last two novels, *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* (1971) and *Blaming* (1976), embody the 'tired

horror' she first invokes in the 1940s.<sup>34</sup> If time moves at all in these two novels, it tends to move backwards or in circles. Gaining momentum here are ideas of repetition and return. In his essay, 'Freud's Masterplot', Peter Brooks argues that narrative 'always makes the implicit claim to be in a state of repetition', which allows the reader to make connections between past and present, and to imagine a future.<sup>35</sup> His essay speaks to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which understands the notion of repetition, the impulse to repeat, to be a primitive instinct distinct from the pleasure principle.<sup>36</sup> These two works inform my discussion of repetition and return and their various manifestations in Taylor's novels.

Anachorism shapes an examination of the novels' key characters, who, I suggest, are out of place both spatially and existentially. These figures have lost their sense of being in the world; indeed, they increasingly have no place in the world. In different ways the novels speak to Beckett's famously paradoxical sentence: 'I can't go on, I'll go on.'<sup>37</sup> As I demonstrate, Taylor uses death to expose the depths of fear and loneliness that seep between the interstices of existence. While her fiction can be witty, affecting and enriching, such qualities can at times mask, at others bring into sharp relief, its darkness, bleakness and anger.

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<sup>34</sup> Taylor first uses the phrase 'tired horror' in *Palladian*, spoken by a character anticipating an uncertain, futile future (PAL, 167). She uses it again in *A Wreath of Roses* (AWR, 11).

<sup>35</sup> Peter Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot," *Yale French Studies*, no. 55/56 (1977). p. 285.

<sup>36</sup> In Sigmund Freud et al., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953).

<sup>37</sup> *The Unnamable*, in Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies and the Unnamable : Three Novels* (London: Calder, 1959). p. 418.

My final deathly theme is Taylor's fictional endings and their importance to the reading experience. I turn here to Frank Kermode's 1967 work, *The Sense of an Ending*, which articulates the human need for beginnings, middles and ends that he likens to realist fiction's linearity of plot.<sup>38</sup> Central to my discussion is Taylor's disruption of this temporal linearity: her texts suggest that after the atrocities of war, life is never again to be linear and straightforward. Once again the notion of the return is foregrounded: both the ambiguity of the endings of Taylor's novels and their intrinsic circularity urge the reader to turn back and reflect on the grimmer aspects of life.

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<sup>38</sup> Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending : Studies in the Theory of Fiction : With a New Epilogue*, New ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

## Chapter 1: In and Out of Time and Place

### Introduction

In this chapter I return to and develop a number of themes touched on in the Introduction. In the first two sections I consider the many contradictions surrounding Taylor's private and public lives, finding there a woman far less conventional than at first she appears, one who never wholly belonged to her chosen domestic and social landscape, nor to the literary establishment that prevailed during her lifetime. My contention is that the anachoristic quality of Taylor's life leaches into her writing, structurally, thematically and poetically. With their elements of fairytale, the gothic, the near-surreal, and the bizarre – and with their numerous allusions to the literary past – Taylor's texts prove considerably less conventional than at first they seem, confounding the literary category into which they are routinely placed.

In the third section I turn once more to *Palladian* to demonstrate how Taylor's literary aesthetic looks back anachronistically to her literary forebears, Austen and Woolf. In unambiguously invoking these two writers, while at the same time drawing in elements that would not be out of place in a novel by Compton-Burnett, *Palladian* provides a paradigmatic example of Taylor's stylistic eclecticism. This blending of traditional and more innovative literary forms introduces a difficulty in attempting to classify Taylor's fiction, since it clearly appeals to both the 'general' and 'serious' reader. Rethinking the way to read Taylor's novels prompts a re-examination of her position within

existing literary classifications. My conclusion is that a new category is wanted, one that I believe provides a better fit for Taylor's work, and indeed for the postwar fiction of a number of her writer contemporaries. Given my thesis of 'out-of-placeness', however, I recognise that such writers will never wholly belong to a single classification.

### **In and out of place – Elizabeth Taylor's private world**

Be regular and ordinary in your life, like a bourgeois, so that you can be violent and original in your works. (AWR, 71)<sup>1</sup>

Despising painters for their bohemian ways, *A Wreath of Roses*' elderly artist, Frances, chose to paint at fixed times having first completed the domestic chores, 'remembering always Flaubert's advice to artists' (AWR, 71). Taylor is articulating something of her own beliefs through this artist-figure: during her struggles to create *A Wreath of Roses*, she tells her lover, Ray Russell, that 'authors should be as ordinary as they can be – and not be special or removed or bohemian.'<sup>2</sup> In opting to marry a prosperous but unintellectual sweet manufacturer and lead a seemingly bourgeois life in the wealthy home counties, Taylor certainly succeeded in appearing as ordinary as possible. Indeed, her friend Robert Liddell, writing of Taylor's first meeting with Compton-Burnett, notes that 'Ivy found her very elegant and

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<sup>1</sup> In a letter to Gertrude Tennant, Flaubert wrote: 'Soyez réglé dans votre vie et ordinaire comme un bourgeois, afin d'être violent et original dans vos oeuvres.' 25 December 1876. *Oeuvres Complètes Illustrées de Gustave Flaubert : Correspondance*, Tome III, 1864-1876 (Paris: Librairie de France, 1924). p. 687. Hilary Mantel recently echoed Flaubert's sentiments in a BBC interview: 'You need blandness, security, safety and routine [...] so that the writing in my head can go on undisturbed.' Hilary Mantel interviewed by James Runcie, BBC 2 *Culture Show* Special, broadcast 17 September 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell, February 1948, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 210.



said of her (I am told): “She’s a young woman who looks as if she had never had to wash her gloves.”<sup>3</sup> In the few interviews Taylor gave and the even fewer articles she wrote, she stresses repeatedly her desire for a quiet life, typified by this oft-quoted comment from 1953:

I am always disconcerted when I am asked for my life story, for nothing sensational, thank heavens, has ever happened. I dislike much travel or change of environment, and prefer the days [...] to come round almost the same, week after week. Only in such circumstances can I find time or peace in which to write.<sup>4</sup>

Much later, in an article discussing *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont's* inclusion on the 1971 Booker Prize shortlist, John Clare observes that Taylor ‘is a taut, deeply reticent, elusive woman. Speaking almost abruptly, she says: “there is not very much to know about me. I have had a rather uneventful life, thank God”. She said that again later, with rare feeling.’<sup>5</sup> Asked to write Taylor’s biography after her death, Elizabeth Jane Howard declined ‘because – among many of her Austen traits – she led a life that contained very little incident.’<sup>6</sup> In my interview with Howard, she added that Taylor had not led the kind of life one could write about, even had she known of her love affair.<sup>7</sup>

This depiction of Taylor’s life as one of bland ordinariness, however, conceals as much as it reveals. The public ‘Elizabeth Taylor’ – the diffident, home-loving, stylish wife and mother who just happens to be a writer – is the

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<sup>3</sup> Another reference to Taylor and gloves. Robert Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy* (London: Peter Owen Publishers, 1986). p. 40.

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Taylor, *New York Herald Tribune* 11 October 1953. Book Review (Section 6). Reproduced in Elizabeth Taylor, *At Mrs Lippincote's* (London: Virago, 1988). p. v.

<sup>5</sup> *The Times*, 22 November 1971. p. 12. For the reasons why *Mrs Palfrey* fails to win the prize, see Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. pp. 369-370.

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Jane Howard, *Slipstream : A Memoir* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2002). p. 399.

<sup>7</sup> Interview, 30 March 2010.

self-image Taylor fiercely defends, reminding Mary Joannou of Celia Johnson in *Brief Encounter*.<sup>8</sup> One reason for maintaining this image, according to Liddell, was that 'she always wished to keep her personal life detached from the mafia of the literary world. [...] her private life was not only her own, and she therefore very properly refused to say anything about it.'<sup>9</sup> Certainly her literary imagination required a calm space in which to thrive, as she reveals in a 1948 letter to her American publisher, Blanche Knopf: 'Change disrupts me and I cannot write. [...] To be allowed to be "ordinary" and live among "ordinary" people (though no one is really that) is the only way that I can write'.<sup>10</sup> Earlier in this letter, however, Taylor writes something deeply unsettling: 'I find it difficult to talk about myself because I often feel I am only a mirror reflecting other people – real or unreal – always more blurred than the person I am talking to or about.'<sup>11</sup>

Such an extraordinary statement suggests that, behind her controlled public persona, Taylor views herself as an insubstantial, shadowy presence, a poor reflection of someone else, pointing to a fragile sense of self.<sup>12</sup> It is almost as if she sees herself as 'other', as out of place, even within her own psyche. As Tim Cresswell argues, 'place' implies concepts of 'insideness' (belonging) and its opposite, 'outsideness', introducing the notion of 'us/them' 'in which

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<sup>8</sup> Mary Joannou, "A Life of Elizabeth Taylor," *Women: A Cultural Review* 21:3 (2010). p. 336.

<sup>9</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 114.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Taylor to Blanche Knopf, 14 October 1948, reproduced in Reeve, ed. *Elizabeth Taylor: A Centenary Celebration*. p. 99.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 99.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor reflects on this notion of the divided, shadowy self in her two most gothic creations, *Palladian*, and the 1954 novella, *Hester Lilly*. Featured in both works is Rossetti's pre-Raphaelite doppelgänger painting, 'How They Met Themselves', where two lovers uncannily encounter themselves while walking in the forest. *Palladian*, p. 107 and *Hester Lilly*, p. 36.

the other is devalued'.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, he writes of an ontological element to 'place': it is 'a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world.'<sup>14</sup> For Taylor, such feelings of 'otherness', 'out-of-placeness', are lasting. As late as 1960 she writes to Liddell that, by being compared to so many different writers, 'it makes me feel I am nothing in myself.'<sup>15</sup> This confused sense of place and self extends to her domestic life.

The view of Taylor as a woman pursuing a mundane life persisted amongst literary critics and reviewers until Nicola Beauman's biography, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*, was published in 2009. While the title clearly refers to Taylor's more famous actress namesake, it could equally refer to the woman behind Taylor's public façade. Until the biography, Trev Broughton's 2005 observation summed up the dominant view: 'The facts of Taylor's life have a stubborn blandness critics find hard to stomach.'<sup>16</sup> Yet even before Beauman's revelatory work, a few articles refer to the 'other' Taylor, suggesting something hidden beneath the veneer. As Rebecca Abrams comments perceptively, 'Taylor's life seems to have been a masterpiece of understatement.'<sup>17</sup> It was in fact more complicated and equivocal than the public was invited to witness. As with her fiction, the other 'Elizabeth Taylor' requires revisiting, rereading even, to expose this more complex version. As a child, as a married woman, and as an author Taylor was something of an anachoristic figure, both in and out of place.

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<sup>13</sup> Cresswell, *Place : A Short Introduction*. pp. 11, 27.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 71.

<sup>16</sup> Trev Broughton, "The Smell of Lavender Water," *Times Literary Supplement*, June 9 2006. p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> Rebecca Abrams, "A Master of Miniaturism," *New Statesman*, 6 November 2001. p. 74.

Despite her lower-middle-class upbringing in a home with little intellectual stimulation, she was a bookish girl, always determined to be a writer. When a schoolgirl, like her creation Angel, she 'handed in long and florid essays with great pride. They were returned, hectic with corrections, stripped bare. [...] I wanted to be a novelist, but it is not easy suddenly to be that at eighteen.'<sup>18</sup> She wrote in her teenage diaries that 'I could be sure of only one thing – that I wanted to be a novelist. [...] Before I was sixteen I had finished my third novel.'<sup>19</sup> While working first as a governess and later as a Boots librarian she read voraciously, compensating for a university education denied her because, though excellent at English, she was poor at maths. During these years she was filled with determination, continuously writing, and destroying, copious works of fiction.

In 1936, at the age of 24, Taylor joined the Communist Party and became an enthusiastic and active worker, attending meetings regularly, and selling the *Daily Worker* on the street. She remained a member for over ten years, after which she became a lifelong Labour supporter. While Party membership increased rapidly in the 1930s, fuelled both by the manifest inequalities at home and the rise of fascism abroad, it would have been less common within Taylor's extended family. Philip Hensher writes of once meeting a cousin of hers and being told 'that the cousin had never been allowed to meet her –

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<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Taylor, "I Was Cooking Breakfast ..." *World Books Broadsheet* (November 1950). See also the opening to Elizabeth Taylor, *Angel*, Virago Modern Classics (London: Virago, 2006).

<sup>19</sup> Elizabeth Taylor, "A Year I Had Forgotten", *Woman's Hour*, broadcast 24 October 1949, BBC Written Archives, Caversham, Reading. Accessed March 2011.

“because she was a communist.”<sup>20</sup> Taylor’s motivation, according to her daughter, was a furious hatred of injustice and unfairness of any kind, a hatred that persisted throughout her life and, as I demonstrate, fuels the anger that seeps between the pages of her fiction.<sup>21</sup> As Howard comments, Taylor had a ‘radical nature ... which smouldered away’.<sup>22</sup> It is this sense of something ‘smouldering away’ between the surface cracks that is key to Taylor’s life and writing. Such political allegiances together with her deeply-held atheistic views must have distinguished Taylor from her more conventional middle-class contemporaries, even if over the years her political activities ceased.<sup>23</sup>

That same year Taylor married her factory owner, opting for a life of increasing prosperity within the affluent Thames Valley where she remained throughout her life. It was a life not without tension, however: in her fifties, Taylor confesses an ambivalence towards it:

Many of my stories are set in the Thames Valley. [...] It has been a part of my life since my childhood; but it rarely enchants me. It simply has a banal reality, which disturbs me. In some lights and conditions I find it depressing, and sometimes the smooth affluence of river-bank life oppresses me; but the reality remains.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Hensher, "The Other Liz Taylor ".

<sup>21</sup> Joanna Kingham, speaking about her mother at the Elizabeth Taylor Day, Battle Library, Reading, 21 April 2012.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Jane Howard, 30 March 2010.

<sup>23</sup> In her mid-fifties Taylor tells Geoffrey Nicholson: 'I haven't got any religion at all. I used to have strong political views, but as I get older I seem to have lost heart. I wore myself out in the Spanish War, when all that fury was going on. I'm a sort of Socialist, but I don't do anything active about it.' Geoffrey Nicholson, "The Other Elizabeth Taylor, Portrait of a Novelist," *Sunday Times*, 22 September 1968. p. 76.

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Taylor, "Setting a Scene," *Cornhill*, no. 1045 (Autumn 1965). p. 70.

To suggest that the landscape and its affluence disturbs, depresses and oppresses her indicates a measure of discomfort, an 'out-of-placeness' in this apparently comfortable world. Given her reticence, it seems surprising she chose to divulge such feelings in an article on the art of fiction-writing, though perhaps it was the only place she *could* voice her discomfort – a form of confessional writing. A friend of the family wrote after Taylor's death that 'she'd had these very strong feelings [about religion] since a schoolgirl. Actually, politics & religion were two things we rather avoided & agreed to differ on.'<sup>25</sup> Increasingly Taylor's domestic life is filled with formal social engagements (which she apparently hated), and with stay-at-home wives and mothers. To help pass the time these women have their hobbies, and to many of Taylor's acquaintances her writing is one such hobby. In an undated letter to Liddell, Taylor reveals at once her antipathy towards the type of woman with whom she must now associate, her delicious spitefulness, and her political sympathies:

A woman at a party ... who is famous for her condescensions, was telling me how very silly she considers it that some women are not satisfied to stay at home [...] Unlike me. I am the admirable type of woman – 'You look after your home and your husband and children, and you have your little hobby that keeps *you* busy.' I smiled the sort of smile that was meant to express gratitude and modesty [...] As my glance strayed over her grey hair, I was really thinking 'You are exactly my age, and you look far older, I think, and you are extremely fat and you don't look at all nice in that dress and anyhow you're South African [...] and everyone knows that your boorish husband drinks like a fish ... I shall just boycott her.'<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Mollie (?) White to Barbara Pym, 9 May 1979. Bodleian Library Special Collections, University of Oxford. Accessed January 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 113. Taylor could be wickedly funny about her neighbours, her fellow writers and critics in her letters to Liddell, but sadly all of these were destroyed by agreement on her death. p. 34.

For such a serious professional writer, to have her life's work reduced to a 'little hobby' was clearly as irritating as it was amusing. As Howard observes, 'she could be quite acid about people'.<sup>27</sup> Beneath the exterior calm of Taylor's public life simmers an angry, witty and complex woman. In 1946 she writes to Russell: 'For all those people at the Cricket Club [...] people in pubs, John's friends and our neighbours, I am really the only communist they have ever talked to, the only one who ever puts the other point of view.'<sup>28</sup> Clare reports in his 1971 interview that Taylor 'takes a fierce delight in opposing her overwhelming [sic] Tory neighbours.'<sup>29</sup> Indeed, it is difficult to support Joannou's assertion that Taylor's desire to protect her privacy stemmed partly from a reluctance to reveal her membership of the Communist Party. Joannou argues that in the postwar anti-communist climate, when ex-communists became '*personae non grata*', they opted 'for silence in self-protection'.<sup>30</sup> On the contrary, Taylor clearly enjoys her anachoristic political position.

In and out of place amongst her largely Conservative-voting neighbours, Taylor chose to inhabit a space between her own social setting and one she found more congenial – the local pub. Yet even here she would not wholly have belonged. Nonetheless, she was a regular and frequent visitor, going alone to meet friends, drink gin, play darts – she was apparently very good –

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Elizabeth Jane Howard, 30 March 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell, June 1946, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 206.

<sup>29</sup> *The Times*, 22 November 1971. p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Mary Joannou, "The Politics of Comedy and War in *At Mrs Lippincote's*," in *Elizabeth Taylor: A Centenary Celebration*, ed. N. H. Reeve (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). p.161.

and listen attentively to conversations that would later emerge in her fiction,<sup>31</sup> a trait she shares with writer-contemporaries such as Patrick Hamilton. One of her surprising pastimes was horseracing and betting. Liddell writes of 'how sad it made her to go to races and see young people throwing their money away', and he reports her sardonic comment: 'had their parents never taught them to study form?'<sup>32</sup> How different might have been her legacy if, instead of the diffident, smartly-dressed, gloved and 'hatted' middle-class lady novelist, she was remembered as the witty, gin-drinking, betting, atheist, communist writer!

But perhaps the most significant disjunction between Taylor's public image of shy conventional wife, mother and author (in that order), and the other Taylor is the young woman who in 1938 began a secret and passionate love affair with a fellow communist and working-class artist/craftsman, Ray Russell. Beginning two years into her marriage and after the birth of her first child, the relationship ended only years later at her husband's insistence. During this period she experienced the trauma of at least one abortion. According to Taylor's biographer, Russell offered her something she had never before experienced: 'he embodied within himself the romance of the working class'; he 'was a painter and she a writer who always considered herself a painter manqué.'<sup>33</sup> In the hundreds of letters Taylor and Russell exchanged she was

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<sup>31</sup> Joanna Kingham and Renny Taylor revealed this about their mother at the Elizabeth Taylor Day, Battle Library, Reading, 21 April 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 75. Betting on horses features in *The Sleeping Beauty* when in this instance it is the son giving his mother instruction in how to lay successful bets.

<sup>33</sup> Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. pp. 80-81.



able to articulate her ideas on the art and craft of writing and its relationship to the real world.<sup>34</sup>

For almost ten years Taylor negotiated a precarious pathway between these two conflicting worlds. Why she opted ultimately for the conventional life is unclear, but a clue may be found in her first novel, *At Mrs Lippincote's*, written as her affair with Russell was reaching its end. The protagonist, Julia, bemoaning her dispiriting marriage, observes nonetheless that 'I never wanted to be a Madame Bovary. That way for ever – literature teaches us as much, if life doesn't – lies, disillusion and destruction. I would rather be a good mother, a fairly good wife, and at peace.' (AML, 204) To be 'a good mother, a fairly good wife, and at peace' is certainly the choice Taylor made. And in terms of her writing, the 'at peace' element may be the most significant. Taylor was passionate about her work, determined to be successful; she would have recognised that leading a life that offered domestic help, boarding schools, and security, would give her the best chance of reaching her potential. The alternative promised an ardent meeting of minds and bodies, but an insecure life financially – and perhaps most devastatingly, the potential loss of her children.

However difficult the choice, Taylor opts for family and a space to write – and her Thames Valley public image is safe. In a letter to Russell written after the affair's end, she observes that 'being a writer has taught me in a hard school, and I have found I have immense reserves & great courage about

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<sup>34</sup> While Beauman has copies of these letters, the copyright remains with the Taylor family. I could not gain access to them.

everything unconnected with my children. I am ambitious and tough and all the soft parts of my heart were gnawed away by vultures long ago'.<sup>35</sup> This determined and even ruthless woman was perhaps less content than she claims always to put family first, however. Though Taylor's son reports that she willingly interrupted her writing to attend to the children, can this be entirely true?<sup>36</sup> In 1943 she refers to Austen's practice of writing, and her anger and frustration are manifest:

Written under the cover of a creaking door. What effect did that have on her nerves? To throw down her pen and cover her ms at any minute, so that she could lace up her nephew's boots or answer questions. Apologetic. A man would have roared. 'I am evolving a new sentence, changing the face of literature. I must not be disturbed.' And shut the door. 'Hush, children, Papa's busy.' It is always that way round. One day it won't be.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, Taylor maintained the image of a writer ever content to compromise her work for her children: 'After a while I grew used to children breathing down my neck while I wrote [...] and have learnt to write (as I have written everything) while answering questions, settling quarrels and cooking dinners'.<sup>38</sup> Yet much later Taylor confesses, with what seems supreme understatement: 'With one's own children it wasn't so easy' to write.<sup>39</sup> Clearly, Taylor was a woman of many contradictions, and her relationship with the literary world was no less contradictory.

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<sup>35</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell, undated but c. 1949, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 186.

<sup>36</sup> Renny Taylor at the Elizabeth Taylor Day, Battle Library, Reading, 21 April 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell, October 1943, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 145.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Neel Mukherjee, "A Fiendish Mood," *Boston Review* 33, no. 1 (2008). p. 37 (from the first edition dust-jacket, Elizabeth Taylor, *At Mrs Lippincote's*).

<sup>39</sup> Nicholson, "The Other Elizabeth Taylor, Portrait of a Novelist." p. 75.

## In and out of place – Elizabeth Taylor’s literary world

I believe that some writers can’t stand up to the rough and tumble of London literary life<sup>40</sup>

Taylor’s literary life displays the same sense of anachoristic ambivalence that we saw in her private life. Even as she confesses to Russell that she is ‘ambitious and tough’ where her writing is concerned, she is simultaneously consumed by self-doubt and an ineluctable shyness. Such diffidence must have contributed to her preferred position outside the prevailing literary establishment. Rarely did she review her contemporaries’ books or produce literary articles, rarely was she persuaded to make public appearances. Geographically too she was out of place: the literary landscape centred on London, which for Taylor was first and foremost a place to visit friends and galleries, to shop and to attend occasional meetings. Of one of Taylor’s rare public performances, Howard writes:

I remember that the first time I met her was when I had to interview her on a television book programme [...] I had prepared some thirty questions to ask her about her writing – to be on the safe side. It wasn’t: we got through those questions in about a minute and a half, since Mrs Taylor, looking like a trapped and rather beautiful owl, answered everything with two of the shortest words in the English language.<sup>41</sup>

A few years earlier Taylor tells Liddell that she had been ‘persuaded to take part in a television programme about books’ alongside Angus Wilson, whom

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<sup>40</sup> Ivy Compton-Burnett, in Elizabeth Taylor, “Memoir of Ivy Compton-Burnett,” reproduced in Reeve, ed. *Elizabeth Taylor: A Centenary Celebration*. p. 73.

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Jane Howard, Introduction to Elizabeth Taylor, *A Game of Hide and Seek*, Virago Modern Classics (London: Virago, 1986). p. vi. This was a 1961 BBC interview with Brian Redhead. The anecdote was retold to me by Howard on 30 March 2010.

she liked very much, and Paul Gallico, whom she did not.<sup>42</sup> ('It is difficult to believe that a writer who writes such drivel as does Paul Gallico could be so unpleasantly deluded with grandeur. Angel wasn't in it.'<sup>43</sup>) But it 'was all a great mistake', she reflects.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, every account of either a public engagement or an interview foregrounds Taylor's nervousness and shyness; and she herself refers repeatedly in letters to her discomfort on such occasions.<sup>45</sup>

Yet while Taylor was far from the heart of the literary world, she nonetheless maintained a place at its outer fringe – in and out, once more. She had a number of writer friends, including Bowen, Liddell, Compton-Burnett and Pym, and during the 1950s she attended, with Pym, meetings of the writers' organisation PEN,<sup>46</sup> but even there she loathed talking of her books: 'I was dreadfully confused when that Indian woman talked about my prose. I am so sorry. I never know what to say.'<sup>47</sup> According to Nicholson, at one point she was 'on the executive of PEN, which brings her into contact with other writers. But she is glad not to be in London'.<sup>48</sup> In fact, as Reeve notes, the closest Taylor comes to a London literary scene is her regular attendance

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<sup>42</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 69.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 69.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* p. 69.

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, an interview with Eric Phillips in *The Writer*, October 1965, which begins: 'She began by saying that she wasn't very good at interviews because she couldn't think of anything to say.' Of her 1968 *Sunday Times* interview with Geoffrey Nicholson, she writes to Patience Ross: 'God knows what I told him in my misery. I wish I hadn't done it. [...] it was one of the most awful days of my life.' Elizabeth Taylor to Patience Ross, 7 July 1969 [?]. Taylor Papers in the possession of the Taylor family. Accessed 10 May 2011.

<sup>46</sup> PEN was an acronym for 'Poets, Essayists and Novelists', which started in London in 1921 and soon became a worldwide organisation devoted to promoting co-operation and friendship amongst writers. It was one of the first organisations to link literature to freedom of expression, according to PEN International.

<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Taylor to Barbara Pym, October 1952. Bodleian Library Special Collections, University of Oxford. Accessed January 2011.

<sup>48</sup> Nicholson, "The Other Elizabeth Taylor, Portrait of a Novelist." p. 76.

over many years at Compton-Burnett's literary luncheons in Braemar Mansions, where discussion centred on contemporary writers such as Kay Dick, Henry Green, Olivia Manning and Muriel Spark.<sup>49</sup> But Taylor never quite belonged to the Braemar 'set', and confesses to being 'always a little scared' of Compton-Burnett.<sup>50</sup> She does, however, record the occasions wittily and at times caustically in her letters to Liddell, at one point noting that Compton-Burnett 'carved up Muriel Spark and Iris Murdoch at the same time as the bacon.'<sup>51</sup>

Taylor's early novels were at once a critical and commercial success, receiving more praise than censure at home and in America. Writers such as Rosamond Lehmann, L P Hartley and Elizabeth Bowen were enthusiastic, and Graham Greene judged *At Mrs Lippincote's* to be 'a novel of great promise'.<sup>52</sup> Towards the end of the 1940s, however, 'Elizabeth's growing reputation began to attract the envy and malice of reviewers', observes Liddell. "Feminine, feminine!" cried the manlier sort of lady novelist.<sup>53</sup> He writes to Pym: 'It is odd how some people hate [Taylor] – Dear Olivia, Mr Walter Allen, my correspondent Miss Kay Dick'.<sup>54</sup> Over the years Taylor and her fiction continued to attract inimical attention from certain members of the literary establishment, their reviews turning evermore antagonistic. And

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<sup>49</sup> Reeve, ed. *Elizabeth Taylor: A Centenary Celebration*. p. xii.

<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Taylor, "Memoir of Ivy Compton-Burnett," reproduced in *Ibid.* p. 73.

<sup>51</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 93.

<sup>52</sup> Graham Greene, *Evening Standard* (details not given), quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 154. Beauman's biography provides a detailed account of the reviews Taylor's fiction received from first publication to last.

<sup>53</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 39.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Liddell to Barbara Pym, 31 May 1953. Bodleian Library Special Collections, University of Oxford. Accessed January 2011. In 1973, however, in her review of *Guide to Modern World Literature*, Kay Dick criticises Martin Seymour-Smith for excluding writers such as Taylor from his compilation. *The Times*, 24 May 1973. p. 12.

while all writers must be affected by unfavourable reviews, Taylor seems to have been utterly crushed.<sup>55</sup> Of such reviews she reflects in a letter to Bowen: 'They do inspire terror [...] one does mind and it seems the end of the world. Very isolating, like being bereaved. One feels the little glances of people who are wondering how one is taking it.'<sup>56</sup> What she clearly deploras, as much as the censure of her peers, is its public nature: she feels utterly exposed, a thing she always strove to avoid.<sup>57</sup> She writes to Liddell of 'licking my wounds' after a particularly bad review.<sup>58</sup> To the *New Yorker* editor, Bill Maxwell, she reveals: 'I do not get anything but a kick on the shins in England. I should find that painful enough – but most of all loathe the spiteful shriek that goes with it – "And you can take that, you little copy-cat."<sup>59</sup>

One reason for provoking such vitriolic attacks from the London set may have been Taylor's decision to live and work quietly in the home counties. Indeed, Compton-Burnett may have been including Taylor in her comment that a number of writers could not survive 'the rough and tumble' of the London literary scene.<sup>60</sup> A more likely explanation, however, was that Taylor's fiction was flourishing commercially, appealing to all kinds of

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<sup>55</sup> Taylor writes: 'Good reviews seem to be extraordinary kindnesses, and although one is encouraged and uplifted by them they never seem to ring true as do the bad ones.' Taylor. *New York Herald Tribune*, 11 October 1953. Reproduced in Elizabeth Taylor, *At Mrs Lippincote's* (London: Virago Press Ltd, 1988). p. vi.

<sup>56</sup> Taylor to Elizabeth Bowen, 12 February 1951. Elizabeth Bowen Collection, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. Accessed February 2011.

<sup>57</sup> She tells Nicholson revealingly in 1968: 'You feel such a fool if you've been slated, and you have to go out and meet people'. Clearly her response to reviews did not harden over the years. Nicholson, "The Other Elizabeth Taylor, Portrait of a Novelist." p.75.

<sup>58</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 76.

<sup>59</sup> Taylor to William Maxwell, October 1953, Grant Papers, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 266.

<sup>60</sup> Taylor, "Memoir of Ivy Compton-Burnett," reproduced in Reeve, ed. *Elizabeth Taylor: A Centenary Celebration*. p. 73.

readers. Of a particularly 'insensitive reviewer', Liddell observes: 'he [...] could not forgive Elizabeth for her good fortune in being able to please the simple as well and the highbrow reader.'<sup>61</sup> Liddell writes something similar in his own critique of Taylor's novels:

It is a delicate and individual vision, which has enabled her to give pleasure to readers at different levels: to the thousands who enjoy the readable, amusing, cosy books, and to the hundreds who care for good writing. [...] In between these two fortunate classes there is a minority, small, I hope, but extremely shrill; it includes a fair number of reviewers. Some of these distrust her work, because it has the good luck to please the many.<sup>62</sup>

Though plainly intending to be complimentary and supportive, Liddell's suggestion that Taylor's books are in any sense 'cosy' is clearly a misreading, and unlikely to have delighted his friend. That Taylor's fiction has wide appeal, however, is noted by her contemporary, A L Barker, in her 1988 introduction to *Hester Lilly*: 'Elizabeth Taylor inspired active envy in some quarters by her capacity to please many sorts and conditions of readers – the discerning most of all.'<sup>63</sup> Just why her texts please both middlebrow and highbrow readers is considered in the following sections where I examine Taylor's literary style and later her literary positioning.

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<sup>61</sup> A review of Taylor's short-story collection, *The Blush* (1958). Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 76.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Liddell, "The Novels of Elizabeth Taylor," *A Review of English Literature* 1, no. 2 (1960). p. 54.

<sup>63</sup> A L Barker, Introduction to Elizabeth Taylor, *Hester Lilly : And Other Stories*, Virago Modern Classics (London: Virago, 1990). p. x.

## Fitting into a literary genealogy

It is puzzling when people say I write like this one and that one and all such different *kinds* of writers and so many of them.<sup>64</sup>

While the concept of anachorism has informed my discussion of Taylor's private and literary worlds, it is to its twin, anachronism, that I now turn to examine in *Palladian* her practice of looking back to the poetics of Austen and Woolf for her literary underpinning. Tracing the lineage of Taylor's literary aesthetic is complicated, however: her fascination with the extraordinary and the near grotesque are not to be found in the works of either of her two great loves.

Penned in 1960, at the midpoint of Taylor's writing career, the epigraph above articulates her frustration at the numerous attempts to define her literary aesthetic in terms of other writers. From early on, Taylor strove to discover her own voice, resisting pressure from others, not least her Communist party friends. In a 1943 article on E M Forster, Taylor quotes from Austen's letters: "I must keep to my own style and go on in my own way [...] and though I may never succeed again in that, I am convinced that I should totally fail in any other."<sup>65</sup> It is a belief Taylor plainly shared. Yet as Barker reflects, '[a]ny writer resembles any other writer to some extent: it may be by as much as choice of characters or period, and as little as a weakness for parentheses.'<sup>66</sup> Taylor is no exception. Woolf famously wrote

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<sup>64</sup> Taylor to Liddell, quoted in Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 71.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Taylor, "E. M. Forster as a Poor Liar," in *Elizabeth Taylor: A Centenary Celebration*, ed. N. H. Reeve (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). p. 66. (Unpublished in her lifetime and dated 25 November 1943).

<sup>66</sup> A L Barker, Introduction to Taylor, *Hester Lilly : And Other Stories*. p. 10.



in her seminal text, *A Room of One's Own*, 'we think back through our mothers if we are women.'<sup>67</sup> And it is to Taylor's female literary forebears and a near contemporary to whom I turn to examine the influences on her work; as Woolf argues, 'books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately.'<sup>68</sup>

From the earliest articles and reviews to the most recent, Taylor has been compared to an extensive list of writers, headed unsurprisingly by Austen and Woolf. Elizabeth Bowen, Ivy Compton-Burnett, the Brontës, Barbara Pym, Katherine Mansfield, Henry James, Henry Green and Samuel Beckett all feature. For example, Richard Austen notes in 1955 that Taylor's technique, 'although owing much to Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen, is highly individual'.<sup>69</sup> Howard writes of Taylor's 'Austen traits'; Broughton speaks of her 'Jamesian eye'; Edmund Gordon compares her language 'to both the crystalline composure of Elizabeth Bowen and the lyrical strangeness of Henry Green'; and Mukherjee refers to her teachers as Austen and the Brontës while owing 'as much to James and Woolf'.<sup>70</sup> It is unsurprising that such a collection closely matches Taylor's own reading:

The reading I do is often re-reading. Jane Austen is very re-readable; [...] I sometimes read "Tristram Shandy" backwards,

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<sup>67</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 1945). p. 76.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.* p. 79.

<sup>69</sup> Richard Austen, "The Novels of Elizabeth Taylor," *Commonweal* (10 June 1955). p. 259. John Crompton examines Taylor's use of intertexts in John Crompton, "All Done by Mirrors: Reflectivity in the Novels of Elizabeth Taylor (1912-75)" (University of Hull, 1992 (Unpublished doctoral thesis)). See also Jane Brown Gillette, "'Oh, What a Something Web We Weave': The Novels of Elizabeth Taylor," *Twentieth Century Literature* 35, no. 1 (Spring 1989).

<sup>70</sup> Howard, *Slipstream : A Memoir*. p. 399. Broughton, "The Smell of Lavender Water." p. 23. Edmund Gordon, "Late Afternoon, Reticent Fiction of the 1940s and 50s," *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 & 26 December 2008. p. 27. Mukherjee, "A Fiendish Mood." p. 37.

thinking that two can play that game of kicking the insides out of the clock. Then I like Tchekov [*sic*], Turgenev, Aksorkov, the Brontës [...] Hardy, Henry James, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf. Of present-day writers my favourites are I. Compton-Burnett (one of the greatest writers in our history), Elizabeth Bowen, Colette, Eudora Welty.<sup>71</sup>

Very little changes in Taylor's taste over the years. In 1974 she observes that 'Jane Austen and Ivy Compton-Burnett are the writers to whom I most often return.'<sup>72</sup> As a young woman she revered Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield – 'nothing either did was ever wrong' – and now adds *Madame Bovary* and a number of 'funny' books, including *Lucky Jim*.<sup>73</sup> Indeed, Taylor's favourite authors are evident in the affectionate way she employs the many intertexts that suffuse her novels, for example *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights* and *Madame Bovary* in *At Mrs Lippincote's*. And her final novel, *Blaming*, includes a reimagined scene from *Sense and Sensibility* that, in its acerbity, would sit happily within a work by Compton-Burnett. As Joannou aptly observes, 'Taylor's uses of her literary intertexts are irreverent, affectionate and knowingly informed by her understanding of the contradictions of her situation as a fictionalising exponent of earlier fiction.'<sup>74</sup> She adds that 'the pleasure of recognition for Taylor's highly literate readers lies in their recognising the difference between the Victorian texts and

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<sup>71</sup> Taylor. *New York Herald Tribune*, 11 October 1953. Reproduced in Elizabeth Taylor, *At Mrs Lippincote's* (London: Virago, 1988). pp. vi-vii. In an amusing scene in *A Wreath of Roses*, Camilla and Liz recall the 'English literary ladies' they used to invite to imaginary tea parties: 'Charlotte', 'Ivy', 'Anne', 'Virginia', 'Emily', 'Jane', 'Katie', 'George Eliot' and 'Elizabeth Barrett' – almost a roll call of her favourite writers. Elizabeth Taylor, *A Wreath of Roses* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1994). pp. 30-31.

<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth Taylor, "Elizabeth Taylor," in *Bookmarks*, ed. Frederic Raphael (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974). p.150.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* p. 150. When only twenty, Taylor wrote a fan letter to Woolf expressing her gratitude for *The Waves*. 15 October 1932, *Woolf Studies Annual*, Vol. 12 2006, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 37.

<sup>74</sup> Joannou, "The Politics of Comedy and War in *At Mrs Lippincote's*." p. 149.

Taylor's knowingly up-to-date reworkings.<sup>75</sup> Yet Taylor does more than simply 'rework' texts from the past: they form the canvas on which she paints her unique style.

Like many of her mid-century contemporaries, Taylor was a transitional writer – neither wholly realist, nor wholly experimental. While indebted to Woolf for the modernist techniques she employs in her early novels, over time Woolf's influence wanes as Compton-Burnett's waxes. As Reeve observes, Taylor's 'later novels are [...] noticeably less dependent upon the literary models, in particular the Brontës and Virginia Woolf, which she had previously used to provide framing for the manner she was making her own.'<sup>76</sup> Indeed, with its theme of existential anguish, *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* suggests an engagement with Beckett, a writer one would not immediately associate with Taylor.

Austen, however, remains a constant; from her, Taylor acquires the conventions of realism, even as she uses them in unexpected ways.<sup>77</sup> As with Austen, she favours a limited canvas on which to scrutinise the inhabitants of small towns and villages, foregrounding the many subtle deceptions and self-deceptions perpetrated by the English middle-classes. It is for her poetics, however, that Taylor owes most to Austen: for the often bitterly ironic narrative voice that places a knowing distance between narrator

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p. 152.

<sup>76</sup> Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 7.

<sup>77</sup> Ian Watt offers a summary of the narrative conventions of the nineteenth-century realist novel. Ian P. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel : Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Hogarth, 1987). pp.9-34. For alternative approaches to the realist novel, see Dennis Walder, ed. *The Realist Novel* (London: Routledge, 1995).

and character, and for her razor-sharp dialogue and exemplary use of free indirect discourse.<sup>78</sup> To illustrate how Taylor speaks to Austen, I turn once more to *Palladian*. In this scene Nanny is talking of the dead wife of the man Cassandra is destined to marry, and we can see how the text glides effortlessly between direct intrusive narration ('scornfully'), direct speech and free indirect discourse, echoing the psychological realism of Austen:

She stirred her tea scornfully. "Yes, helpless as a babe new-born she was." There was no question of her speaking of the dead with disrespect. She knew well enough ladies ought to be like that; going off for the day in the pouring rain on a horse which was all temperament and vice, fending for herself; or driving the car, coming back covered with oil, talking in the hall about sprockets and such-like, then, later: 'Nanny, do me up! Where's me velvet shoes? Where's me sapphire ring?' (PAL, 56)

Such a technique draws the reader deep into Nanny's private world of memories and emotions articulated in her own demotic language. It is a literary practice we associate equally with Woolf, although in her case there is often a blurring between free indirect discourse and stream-of-consciousness. In moving in and out of literary time, Taylor creates something fresh: while the style is Austen's, the language is distinctly Taylor's. Nowhere in Austen's oeuvre would such idiomatic working-class speech patterns figure. Yet both Austen and Taylor are cool, sharp-eyed miniaturists who delight in trapping their specimens before dissecting them

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<sup>78</sup> David Lodge claims that Austen 'was perhaps the first novelist to master that judicious blend of authorial omniscience and limited view-point, sliding subtly between direct narrative and free indirect speech, that permits the novelist to command the simultaneous double perspective of public and private experience'. David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing : Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977). p. 39.

for inspection.<sup>79</sup> Here the narrator exposes Nanny's true nature: 'She had taken her standards from lives of idleness and plenty and despised those who worked for their living, and could not pick up a duster now without a feeling of being lowered in her own eyes.' (PAL, 56)

For the more modernist-inflected elements of her literary style, Taylor looks to Woolf. As with a number of writers who came after the high modernism of Woolf and Joyce, Taylor transforms the stream-of-consciousness into a stream of speech or narrative, achieving the same sense of unstoppable, unmediated thoughts or feelings.<sup>80</sup> In this scene the newly orphaned Cassandra visits her garrulous old headmistress before taking up her post as governess:

"But it was dismal for you there by yourself, dear. You should have come round to lunch; or tea, at least. You could have managed that. I sometimes think you have a tendency towards sadness, Cassandra. You need more pleasure, and I rather wonder how you will contrive to get it at the Vanbrughs. You really do need taking out of yourself ... and I don't remember Margaret Vanbrugh being so very gay ... of course, she and Helen parted after they left school and then you know how it is ... but I imagine she was sensible rather than gay when she was a girl. The cigarettes are just beside you ... or would you like a bar of chocolate?" (PAL, 9)

That *Palladian* is haunted by Woolf is evident in the following scene which occurs towards the end of the narrative, when the materiality of the Palladian house is being conquered by the natural world. Though less discursive, it could not echo more plainly the description in *To The Lighthouse* of the

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<sup>79</sup> For an argument that counters the view of Austen as simply a gentle satirist, see D W Harding, "Regulated Hatred: An Aspect of the Work of Jane Austen," in *Jane Austen : A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Ian P. Watt (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963).

<sup>80</sup> Patrick Hamilton and Elizabeth Bowen, for example.

Ramsays' house slipping into decay as the First World War advances. As with Woolf's text, the passage signals an end of an era:

But as the life was gradually withdrawn, the house became a shell only, seeming to foreshadow its own strange future when leaves would come into the hall, great antlered beetles run across the hearths, the spiders let themselves down from the ceilings [...] Then the stone floor of the hall would heave up and erupt with dandelion and briar, the bats swing up the stairs and the dusty windows show dark stars of broken glass. As soon as grass grows in the rooms and moles run waveringly down passages, the house is not a house any more, but a monument, to show that in the end man is less durable than the mole and cannot sustain his grandeur. (PAL, 187)<sup>81</sup>

From Woolf, Taylor inherits the desire to plunge into both the narrative stream and her characters' psyches, more interested in interior than exterior journeys. Like Woolf, and indeed Flaubert, Taylor eschews detailed plots, preferring to capture moments in time – 'crystallising a moment, to make something of it, make it stay'.<sup>82</sup> Taylor comments dryly: I 'very much like reading books in which practically nothing ever happens'.<sup>83</sup>

It is, however, the painterly quality of Taylor's literary aesthetic for which she is most indebted to Woolf, the ability to create in words scenes reminiscent of impressionist paintings. To Nicholson, Taylor reflects: "I always feel that in many ways I ought to have been a painter – and I can't even draw a rabbit.

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<sup>81</sup> See Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, Penguin Popular Classics. (London: Penguin, 1996). p. 205. An almost identical scene occurs at the end of *Angel* when the collapse of the once grand Paradise House is anticipated. (ANG, 251-252)

<sup>82</sup> *Woman's Hour* interview with Stella Dobson: "Have You Met Elizabeth Taylor?", broadcast 11 April 1956. BBC Written Archives, Caversham, Reading. Accessed March 2011.

<sup>83</sup> Taylor. *New York Herald Tribune*, 11 October 1953. Reproduced in Elizabeth Taylor, *At Mrs Lippincote's* (London: Virago, 1988). p. v.

But I see everything in scenes as a painter would."<sup>84</sup> Woolf-inspired painterly images, however, are often reimagined in cinematic terms. The following scene of a rain-soaked landscape is presented as if viewed through a camera lens:

The garden was brilliant, drenched. Roses like sodden, crushed up paper hung against the stable walls, the stones across the yard were washed clean and little cascades of rain were shaken from the lime trees. Down the lane, rivulets of wet sand crossed and recrossed one another and brown bubbled water hastened still into an occasional drain. At the turn of the lane the whole valley lay exposed. The rain-beaten corn stretched away in great wet swathes as if it were cut and strewn and piled across the fields, with the unevenness of a desert after a sandstorm, undulating, blown and chaotic. Like a great painting of corn (PAL, 139-140).

Yet even as Taylor's literary aesthetic looks back to Austen and Woolf, it is altogether of its time. Her desire to expose the peculiar within the quotidian, what David Baddiel describes as 'the fantastical in the mundane',<sup>85</sup> is a contemporary preoccupation, one she shares with Compton-Burnett, whose many almost timeless novels celebrate the failings and eccentricities of a series of wholly dysfunctional families. Indeed, *Palladian's* country-house setting, claustrophobically crammed with ill-matched, disconnected family members, owes much to Compton-Burnett, who is herself indebted to Austen.

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<sup>84</sup> Nicholson, "The Other Elizabeth Taylor, Portrait of a Novelist." p. 76. In an Afterword to Taylor's last novel, *Blaming*, her daughter writes: 'Looking at paintings was one of my mother's favourite occupations. [...] She said that it was wonderful because she wrote books, and this made it possible for her to buy paintings.' Joanna Kingham, Afterword to Elizabeth Taylor, *Blaming*, Virago Modern Classics (London: Virago, 2006).

<sup>85</sup> David Baddiel in *BBC Book Club* with James Naughtie, Radio 4, broadcast 1 July 2012.

But Compton-Burnett's influence can most clearly be seen in Taylor's dialogue, as humorous as it is cutting. As Stevie Davies reflects, Taylor's 'scalpel pen is often as sharply angled as that of Jane Austen', but her dialogue is as 'potent' as Compton-Burnett's.<sup>86</sup> Hensher too recognises 'Compton-Burnettish extravagances' within Taylor's work.<sup>87</sup> Compton-Burnett's avant-garde, witty and spare fiction is composed almost entirely of dialogue in which all characters speak the same language whatever status or class. When Hilary Spurling talks of the 'ruthlessness' with which Compton-Burnett 'probes the jagged underside' of family conversations, she might be referring to Taylor.<sup>88</sup> The following dialogue from *Palladian* is a fine example:

"She has made the change from governess to mistress of the house very charmingly," said Tinty. "It is like one of the fairy tales."

"But not a fairy tale in which I should want to be the heroine," said Margaret. "One begins to see what is meant by 'they lived happily ever after'."

"What are they doing now?" asked Tinty, who always liked to know where people were.

"I think he is giving her a Greek lesson," said Tom. (PAL, 190)

As Taylor observes of Compton-Burnett's oeuvre, evil 'is committed, not by any sinister outsider, but within the close ranks of the family – not only the spectacular crimes of violence, adultery, forgery, theft; but the daily riddling away of one person's defences by another – verbal cruelty and betrayal.'<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Stevie Davies, "Angles of Embarrassment in 'the Blush' and Elizabeth Taylor's Fiction," in *Elizabeth Taylor: A Centenary Celebration*, ed. N. H. Reeve (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). pp. 167, 168.

<sup>87</sup> Hensher, "The Other Liz Taylor".

<sup>88</sup> Hilary Spurling, "The Last and the Best", in Burkhart, *The Art of I. Compton-Burnett: A Collection of Critical Essays*. p. 77.

<sup>89</sup> Taylor, "Memoir of Ivy Compton-Burnett." Karl offers a recipe for Compton-Burnett's brand of fiction: 'Take a Jane Austen character and add various ingredients derived from the Freudian unconscious, mix well with inadvertent incest, chance murder, fortuitous blackmail'.



She could be speaking of her own novel, *Palladian*, in particular the disturbing scenes involving the troubled character of Tom discussed in the Introduction, a character whose realist presence confounds the light-hearted gothic framing of the text.

Yet comparatively few critics acknowledge 'the scalpel within the kid glove' of Taylor's fiction, its underlying strangeness, or indeed the rage that so often simmers between its pages. Leclercq, for example, constantly misreads or under-reads Taylor, comparing her tone to 'that of a quiet, well-bred English lady'. Furthermore, she refers puzzlingly to Taylor's 'lack of anger', an assessment more perceptive critics would challenge.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, Rosemary Dinnage observes of Taylor that '[f]erocity is not absent from her fiction', while Hensher suggests that the 'growing impression of her is of violence, passion and rage underneath an immaculately maintained surface; and that will do for the novels, too.' Reeve also argues that '[f]eelings of rage often seem to send tremors through the coolly ironic surfaces of Taylor's writing'.<sup>91</sup> While Woolf censures Charlotte Brontë for the anger that causes her books to be 'deformed and twisted', I suggest it is the anger that seeps between the interstices of both Brontë's and Taylor's novels that heightens their textual complexity.<sup>92</sup>

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Frederick Robert Karl, *A Reader's Guide to the Contemporary English Novel*, Revised ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1972). p. 10.

<sup>90</sup> Leclercq, *Elizabeth Taylor*. pp. 6, 7.

<sup>91</sup> Dinnage, "The Tick of Blood in the Wrist." p. 1096; Hensher, "The Other Liz Taylor". Reeve, "Elizabeth Taylor (1912-1975)." p. 3.

<sup>92</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. p. 70. The roots of Taylor's anger are explored in the following chapter.

Despite being corralled into the mid-century domestic enclosure, Taylor's fiction does not entirely belong there. Her literary aesthetic is altogether too odd, too caustic, too angry, too eclectic, too painterly to be contained within its borders. Her texts require close reading, even rereading, to appreciate fully the complexity and diversity of her literary aesthetic. As Ali Smith observes in a 2012 essay collection, we would 'never expect to understand a piece of music on one listen, but we tend to believe we've read a book after reading it just once.'<sup>93</sup> Taylor is reported to have said of her favourite paintings (by Elinor Bellingham Smith) that 'whenever she looked at them she found something different there.'<sup>94</sup> The same could be said of Taylor's own creations. As Dinnage neatly summarises, '[u]nder their sheep's clothing [...] all her books are sleek wolves.'<sup>95</sup> In the final section I discuss the difficulty of positioning Taylor's 'sleek wolves' within current literary classifications.

### **In and out of category**

Being able to please the simple as well as the highbrow reader<sup>96</sup>

Mid-century writers such as Taylor, whose work troubles the borders between a number of dualities – middlebrow/highbrow, experimental/realist and so on – struggled for critical recognition. As Reeve notes in aligning Taylor with women novelists such as Bowen, Compton-Burnett, Macaulay,

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<sup>93</sup> Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012). p. 31.

<sup>94</sup> Interview by 'Taurus' for the Bury Free Press, 17 March 1971, included in Joanna Kingham's introduction to Taylor, *A Dedicated Man, and Other Stories*.

<sup>95</sup> Dinnage, "The Tick of Blood in the Wrist." p. 1096.

<sup>96</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 76.

West and Lehmann, 'because so much of their material was drawn from the conventions of romantic or domestic fiction, and from the aspirations and anxieties of their predominantly middle-class readership, these writers tended to be regarded as insufficiently searching and innovative to be numbered unequivocally among the modernist elite.'<sup>97</sup> How then do we place the seemingly unplaceable, those mid-century writers who are at once in and out of place and time? This section foregrounds the importance of the reading experience to the process of classification, before going on to examine a number of literary categories that may be appropriate. In rejecting these, it ventures to propose a new classification: 'after-modernism'.

Reader experience is at the heart of Hilary Radner's method of classification of women writers. According to her, the 'division of narratives into popular culture and literature corresponds to two distinct, rhetorically inscribed regimes of pleasure, two different ways of producing pleasure for the reader'.<sup>98</sup> These she terms, after Freud, 'hysterical' and 'obsessional'.<sup>99</sup> As she explains, the 'popular culture text corresponds to the formation of symptoms characteristic of the hysteric – a pleasure in the symptom itself.'<sup>100</sup> The pleasure is to be found in the *process* of reading, the *textual experience*, rather than the 'resolution of an enigma'.<sup>101</sup> Such pleasure she designates 'textual consumership', associating it with the kind of text Barthes has termed

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<sup>97</sup> Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 2.

<sup>98</sup> Radner, "Extra-Curricular Activities: Women Writers and the Readerly Text." p. 253.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. p. 253. For an extended discussion on Radner's notion of hysterical and obsessional fiction, see Introduction to Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions: The "Woman's Novel" in the Twentieth Century*. pp. 1-7.

<sup>100</sup> Radner, "Extra-Curricular Activities: Women Writers and the Readerly Text." p. 253.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. p. 254.

'readerly' [*lisible*].<sup>102</sup> Radner is here speaking of the most widespread, widely-read form of fiction. To the popular novel, the 'readerly' novel, Radner opposes the literary: 'Literature offers pleasure as a goal rather than as a process – a pleasure in deferral and displacement, rather than a pleasure in the symptom itself.'<sup>103</sup> She continues: this 'structure of displacement and deferral corresponds to the symptomology of the obsessional neurotic, who tends to take pleasure in repression.'<sup>104</sup> That is, the reader's experience of the text as merely pleasure is repressed.

Barthes designates such a text 'writerly' [*scriptible*].<sup>105</sup> He too is concerned with the role of the reader: 'the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text. Our literature is characterized by the pitiless divorce which the literary institution maintains between the producer of the text and its user.'<sup>106</sup> While the 'writerly' text makes considerable demands on the reader, the 'readerly' makes few, resulting in a passive form of reading: 'Opposite the writerly text [...] is its countervalue, its negative, reactive value: what can be read, but not written: the *readerly*. We call any readerly text a classic text.' They 'make up the enormous mass of our literature.'<sup>107</sup> In Barthes' view, we differentiate the 'writerly' from the 'readerly' through the process of interpretation, 'an appreciation [...] of the *more or less* each text can mobilize.'<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid. p. 255. Barthes, *S/Z*. p. 4.

<sup>103</sup> Radner, "Extra-Curricular Activities: Women Writers and the Readerly Text." p. 254.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. p. 254.

<sup>105</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*. p. 4.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. pp. 4, 5. He is referring to the classic realist texts of writers such as Zola, Balzac and Dickens.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p. 5. Barthes ideas on the classic realist text were to prove highly contentious in the late-1970s/early-1980s, sparking heated debate amongst literary theorists. In his

If we return to Taylor's own reading preferences, we find an eclectic mix of the so-called 'serious' and 'popular', experimental and realist – from Joyce to Colette, Flaubert to Amis. In noting that she sometimes reads *Tristram Shandy* backwards, Taylor is signalling, albeit playfully, the crucial role of the reader. As Radner concludes, 'texts do not belong to one category or another but are determined by the methodology of reading that produces them.'<sup>109</sup>

This emphasis on reader engagement – appreciating 'the more or less' of a text – is clearly pertinent to my discussion of Taylor's literary positioning, and indeed to my thesis as a whole. Equally helpful are the dual entities Barthes proposes in *The Pleasure of the Text*: the text of pleasure and the text of bliss, which in many ways correlate to his 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts. A

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controversial 1978 essay 'The End of a Meta-Language: From George Eliot to *Dubliners*', Colin MacCabe argues that there is almost no room for interpretation in the narrative discourse of the classic realist text, citing in support passages from *Middlemarch*. Instead, the text holds the 'conviction that the real can be displayed and examined through a perfectly transparent language', resulting in the reader as passive consumer. MacCabe opposes the text 'which determines its own reading' to one 'which demands an *activity* of reading'. He does, however, qualify his statements to an extent: 'Classic realism can never be absolute; the materiality of language [discourse] ensures there will always be fissures which will disturb the even surface of the text.' In Colin MacCabe, *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). 13-38. pp. 18, 28, 27. Catherine Belsey argues in similar vein against the classic realist text: 'The reader is invited to perceive and judge the "truth" of the text, the coherent, non-contradictory interpretation of the world as it is perceived by an author whose autonomy is the source and evidence of the truth of the interpretation.' See Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice*, New Accents (London: Methuen, 1980). 67-84. pp. 68-69. David Lodge in a 1980 essay entitled 'Middlemarch and the Idea of the Classic Realist Text', refutes MacCabe's conception of the classic realist text, calling his analysis of *Middlemarch* a 'distortion of George Eliot's practice'. In noting that MacCabe accepts there are elements of the classic realist text that can never be fully determined, Lodge proceeds to demonstrate this through an analysis of passages from *Middlemarch*. He concludes that the novel can be read and reread precisely because it does not fully determine interpretation. David Lodge, "Middlemarch and the Idea of the Classic Realist Text," in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Arnold Kettle (London: Heinemann Educational in association with the Open University Press, 1981). 218-238. pp. 221, 236.

<sup>109</sup> Radner, "Extra-Curricular Activities: Women Writers and the Readerly Text." p. 255.

classic realist novel he designates a 'text of pleasure': 'the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading.'<sup>110</sup> Against this, Barthes sets the 'modern novel' ('today's writers') which he calls a 'text of bliss': 'the text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts, [...] unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.'<sup>111</sup> Where the text of pleasure can be easily and quickly consumed; the text of bliss must be savoured slowly, lingered over.

Barthes' and Radner's theories of reading, based on their various binaries, are useful starting points in thinking about how to read Taylor's fiction. Her novels, however, are neither wholly 'readerly' nor 'writerly', neither entirely 'hysterical' nor 'obsessional', neither texts of 'pleasure' nor 'bliss'. Rather, they are a blend of these dualities: the 'writerly' *within* the 'readerly'; 'bliss' *within* 'pleasure'. In the introduction to this thesis I offered the metaphor of 'the scalpel *within* the kid glove' as a way of encapsulating the contradictions to be found in *Palladian* when viewed through my twinned concepts, anachronism and anachorism. This study argues that the metaphor can usefully be applied to Taylor's entire oeuvre, both to the way she writes and to a way to read her. As I have shown, her literary aesthetic is a fusion of realism and innovation: within the 'kid glove' of a seemingly comfortable form of domestic fiction is to be found the 'scalpel' of the unexpected – the out-of-place-and-time elements that defamiliarize her texts, disrupting their

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<sup>110</sup> Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*. p. 14.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* p. 14.

domestic framing. Within Taylor's novels we find scenes that speak to their particular mid-century moment: for example, gross images of war's brutality, a feminist discourse on the lamentable position of women in society, instances of existential despair. Inviting us to read for the enjoyment of the reading experience, her fiction then asks to be read in a way that is distinctly more challenging.

In an attempt to identify amongst existing classifications a suitable location for Taylor's literary aesthetic, I examine three categories that have appeared on the literary scene comparatively recently: 'middlebrow', 'late modernism' and 'intermodernism'. My contention is that Taylor's fiction requires a category that combines the conventional with the experimental, even as it engages with its historical times to produce something new and distinct. While the traditional elements would perhaps fit within the 'middlebrow', the more experimental elements look to categories that engage with the poetics of modernism.

Much attention of late has focused on the so-called 'middlebrow' fiction of the twentieth century, not least in Nicola Humble's work of 2001, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*.<sup>112</sup> "Middlebrow" has always been a dirty word', begins Humble, and it is hard to disagree.<sup>113</sup> Unsurprisingly Woolf has nothing but

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<sup>112</sup> Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. See also, for example, The Middlebrow Network online. Baker, *Happily Ever After?: Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain, 1945-1960*. Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983). Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions: The "Woman's Novel" in the Twentieth Century*. Hartley, *Millions Like Us: British Women's Fiction of the Second World War*.

<sup>113</sup> Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. p. 1.

contempt for those she deems middlebrow: 'They are neither one thing nor the other. They are not highbrows, whose brows are high; nor lowbrows, whose brows are low.'<sup>114</sup> Humble's work aims to counter such pernicious judgements by seeking to rehabilitate both the term 'middlebrow' and the so-called middlebrow literature of the 1920s onwards. Her working definition is that 'the middlebrow novel is one that straddles the divide between the trashy romance or thriller' and 'the philosophically or formally challenging novel.'<sup>115</sup> It ranges 'from intellectual, abstruse novels such as those of Ivy Compton-Burnett and Elizabeth Bowen to light *jeux d'esprit* by P. G. Wodehouse and E. F. Benson'.<sup>116</sup> According to this definition, Taylor's oeuvre fits easily within the middlebrow as a popular cultural construct, yet so too does almost all mid-century fiction save for the 'trashy' and the distinctly avant-garde. Humble does, however, concede that middlebrow and highbrow are 'far from impermeable categories', that there are overlaps and hybrids.<sup>117</sup>

Even as Humble attempts to rescue the term middlebrow from the mire into which Woolf submerges it, and celebrate both the novelists and texts she designates middlebrow, the imprecision and elasticity of her definition suggest little commonality between the varied writers and dissimilar fictive

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<sup>114</sup> From an unsent 1932 letter to *The New Statesman*, Virginia Woolf, "Middlebrow," in *The Death of the Moth : And Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942). p. 115.

<sup>115</sup> Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s : Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. p. 11.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. p. 13. In his chapter of somewhat condescending praise entitled 'Composite', Karl offers a similar list of novelists whom he argues: 'have not been or are not yet in the first rank.' 'The novels of Pamela Hansford Johnson are the basic material of the publisher looking for a well-made, intelligent novel that stands the chance of a book club selection'. Alongside Johnson, he lists Nancy Mitford, L P Hartley, Rosamund Lehmann, Olivia Manning, Muriel Spark and Taylor. Karl, *A Reader's Guide to the Contemporary English Novel*. pp. 274-275.

<sup>117</sup> Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s : Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. p. 26.



forms under consideration. 'Middlebrow' is clearly a slippery concept that speaks more to the changing cultural values of the period than to any specificity of style or content. If, at base, all that the term 'feminine middlebrow' can express is a popular form of fiction written largely by middle-class women, about middle-class women and for the female middle-class reader, it contributes little to an enterprise that seeks to categorise the particular literary aesthetic of such ambivalently anachoristic writers as Taylor. Moreover, on a personal note I find it impossible, however noble the effort, to wrest the term from its association with all that is mediocre.

While at first sight, the concept of 'late modernism' appears to resolve the modernism/realism, serious/popular dichotomy and provide a home for anachoristic postwar writers such as Taylor, in fact it does not. Tyrus Miller's *Late Modernism* (1999) seeks to uncover a discrete late modernist aesthetic in the works of those who published after the high modernism of the 1920s, foregrounding texts by Wyndham Lewis, Djuna Barnes and Samuel Beckett.<sup>118</sup> To Miller, late modernism is located between the decline of modernism and the embryonic phase of postmodernism, offering a response both to late modernism's literary antecedents and to the historical events of the interwar years. His version of late modernism is thus a transitional phase of literary development which, in his study, he limits to the late 1920s and 1930s.<sup>119</sup> Jed Esty, in *A Shrinking Island* (2004), takes a different approach,

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<sup>118</sup> Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism : Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley ; London: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>119</sup> Brian McHale too considers late modernism to be a transitional phase between the epistemology of modernism and the ontology of postmodernism, citing Beckett's trilogy as an example of the gradual shift from one to the other. See Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1989).

positing a link between late modernism and Britain's contracting empire during the period from the 1930s to the 1960s.<sup>120</sup> Focusing on the late works of modernists such as Eliot, Woolf and Forster, Esty contends that literature took an 'anthropological turn' away from an international, metropolitan position towards a preoccupation with Englishness as one culture among many, drawing out a connection between the modernist aesthetic, the historical conditions, and the writings of early postcolonialists.<sup>121</sup> As Marina MacKay argues, the 'loss of the empire [...] is the engine that drives *A Shrinking Island*'.<sup>122</sup>

In that they consider both literary poetics and a response to the historical events at mid-century, these overlapping conceptualisations of late modernism might appear to address the twin preoccupations of Taylor's literary aesthetic. Yet in pointing either to an extended period of modernism, or to a literary poetics that reaches out to the experimentalism of postmodernism and postcolonialism, they emphasise late modernism's active, ongoing commitment to innovation. Even as Taylor's oeuvre engages with the modernist aesthetic, it cannot itself be deemed experimental. While it is a transitional fiction, it cannot be seen to bridge the gap between modernism and postmodernism, and thus does not sit comfortably within any construal of the term 'late modernism'. Instead, I turn to Kristin Bluemel's 'intermodernism' which at first sight seems to provide a better location for Taylor's oeuvre.

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<sup>120</sup> Joshua Esty, *A Shrinking Island : Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>122</sup> Marina MacKay, *Modernism and World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). p. 17.

In her edited collection of 2009, *Intermodernism*, Bluemel highlights neglected writers of the interwar, wartime and immediate postwar periods whom she designates 'intermodernists'.<sup>123</sup> As with modernism, intermodernism exhibits both formal and temporal characteristics. The three defining features she advances for intermodernists are: cultural (generally the employed classes); political (typically radical); and literary (producing non-canonical, even middlebrow writing). Bluemel's chosen subjects take in many of Taylor's contemporaries, including Bowen, Green, Greene and Hamilton, yet Taylor herself is omitted. While Bluemel's intermodernism shares with late-modernist scholarship the desire to challenge the dominant position of modernism and postmodernism in twentieth-century literary history, her aim is primarily to recover neglected 'middlebrow' writers, and those with explicit political agenda; thus intermodernism diverges from late modernism's principal concern with extending the modernist aesthetic further into the twentieth century. Although a case could be made for Taylor's inclusion as a Bluemel intermodernist, I would not wish to classify her as middlebrow. Instead, I want to argue for her to be designated an 'after-modernist', appropriating the title of Marina MacKay's and Lyndsey Stonebridge's 2007 collection, *British Fiction after Modernism*, which includes essays featuring writers such as Bowen, Hamilton, Greene, Green and Taylor.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Bluemel, ed. *Intermodernism : Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth-Century Britain*.

<sup>124</sup> MacKay and Stonebridge, eds., *British Fiction after Modernism : The Novel at Mid-Century*.

To MacKay and Stonebridge, the phrase 'after modernism' is applied not simply in terms of chronology, but to reflect the notion that mid-century writers 'are so indebted to modernism that they have to be read in relation to it.'<sup>125</sup> They argue that 'mid-century fiction has a complex and under-thought relation to its own history – both its historical and literary legacies and to the history of which it was such an uneasy part.'<sup>126</sup> While this critically uncomfortable period resists a neat, all-embracing literary label, and while no single literary form prevailed, mid-century writers 'were haunted by the past, as well as by the present and future.'<sup>127</sup> Taylor was no exception. The mid-century was a time when the artificial and unstable boundaries between realist and radical fiction were being complicated by writers such as Bowen, Spark, Green and Compton-Burnett, and indeed Taylor. As Andrzej Gąsiorek observes in his 1995 work, *Post-War British Fiction*, the representation of mid-century fiction as a clash between innovation and realism is both reductive and irrelevant.<sup>128</sup> Gąsiorek's interest is in those writers whose works fall between Barthes 'scriptible' and 'lisible', those 'which tend to try to reconceptualize realism rather than to reject it outright in the wake of modernist and postmodernist critique.'<sup>129</sup> Though he does not discuss Taylor, he might have.

As suggested in the Introduction, 'after-modernism' exhibits a temporal and stylistic duality. It is 'after' in the historical sense of coming 'after' the war, confronting the 'aftermath' of war. It is 'after' in the stylistic sense of

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid. p. 4.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. p. 7.

<sup>128</sup> Gąsiorek, *Post-War British Fiction : Realism and After*. p. v.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. p. v.

'influenced by', even 'haunted by' modernism. And in terms of reader experience, it is 'after' in the sense of evolving out of dualistic approaches to reading texts. It is the 'after' that constantly looks back – historically, poetically, culturally – invoking notions of the 'return'. Indeed, the 'after-modernist' never quite frees herself from her literary and historical past to turn unfettered towards the future. We can thus situate Taylor as an 'after-modernist' if we understand 'after-modernism' to be a mid-century engagement with the modernist legacy, together with the historical period dominated by the Second World War and subsequent changes wrought in British socio-political life. Such a classification might happily embrace the postwar fiction of writers such as Bowen, Green, Hamilton, Angus Wilson and Sylvia Townsend Warner, all of whom include experimental techniques within their essentially realist fiction. It would, though, exclude those writers Humble considers 'their more frivolous contemporaries'.<sup>130</sup> The 'after-modernists', however, can only ever be a loose confederacy of writers and texts: such ambivalently anachoristic writers will never entirely belong.

## **Conclusion**

The twin concepts of anachorism and anachronism afford a valuable and novel means of examining Taylor – the woman, the writer, and her writing. Yet there is always an ambiguity surrounding these interconnected concepts in their application to Taylor and her fiction, always a sense of being 'in and out'. Taylor was in and out of place in her chosen domestic world, in and out

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<sup>130</sup> Writers such as Stella Gibbons, Dodie Smith and Nancy Mitford. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s : Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. p. 2.

of place amongst the mid-century literary scene. This notion of never quite fitting spills over into her fiction temporally, spatially, socially, thematically and poetically. To classify Taylor's oeuvre as purely 'realist' is to fail to recognise the manner in which it subtly undermines realism's conventions, and indeed the way it seeps across the threshold into other, often anachronistic, fictive genres. Stylistically, Taylor looks back to earlier literary traditions, braiding elements of Woolf's modernism with Austen's traditional method. To these she adds a deep seam of strangeness shared with Compton-Burnett and, on occasion, an existential despair redolent of Beckett. These aspects, together with the anger that smoulders in the textual fissures, often steal into her fiction under cover of a layer of sharp comedy. Only a careful reading will expose the scalpel within the kid glove.

The theme of not-quite-belonging weaves its way through this study as I turn now to examine Taylor's twelve novels. In the next chapter those from the 1940s are placed under the microscope of my conceptual framework in a manner that enables me to demonstrate how Taylor's use of both anachorism and anachronism allows war and its aftershocks to leach into three of the four novels published between 1945 and 1949. As we have seen, however, *Palladian* fails to follow this practice; its references to war and indeed the 1940s are rare. The reasons why Taylor may have chosen to circumvent the war in this 1946 novel are explored in the chapter.

## Chapter 2: Placing War in the Domestic

### Introduction

To describe Taylor's 1940s texts as war novels would clearly be an exaggeration: there are no foreign battlefields, prison camps, resistance movements, or bomb-damaged cities; neither are the outrages committed in time of war exposed. Or are they? While the Second World War is not Taylor's principal preoccupation in these novels, it is very far from absent. In fact, Taylor writes most emphatically in the wake of war, uneasily positioned in the turbulent waters that trail behind its close. War and its aftershocks are deeply present – in setting, mood, theme, character and subtexts. As Gill Plain asserts, '[w]hile established women writers as diverse as Virginia Woolf and Vera Brittain turned their pens to war, their preoccupation was less with the outward destruction of war, than with a more introspective contemplation of the human condition under war.'<sup>1</sup> It is my contention that, through Taylor's application of the twin concepts anachronism and anachorism, war and its associated atrocities are allowed to infiltrate three of her four 1940s novels, dragging images and sensations from the battlegrounds and prison camps into the postwar domestic terrain.

Taylor's method echoes Bowen's approach to the telling of war. Writes Bowen of her own wartime stories, '[t]hese are [...] studies of climate, war-climate, and of the strange growths it raised. [...] I see war (or should I say

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<sup>1</sup> Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996). p. 3.

feel war?) more as a territory than as a page of history'.<sup>2</sup> It is these 'strange growths', these disquieting elements that may seem temporally and spatially out of place in Taylor's 1940s novels, that are the concern of this chapter. As Neil Reeve observes, Taylor as a writer was moulded by war, having published nothing before its outbreak. Considering her alongside William Sansom, he argues that 'an abiding preoccupation with the fragility and porousness of the shelters people build, physical or mental, is something that can be traced in their work long afterwards'.<sup>3</sup> This is perhaps unsurprising when we consider that war's long shadow persisted well into the 1960s. Marina Mackay notes: 'It would be hard to overstate the continuing centrality of the war in contemporary English culture – this is always just "the war", colloquially, as if there had been no other'.<sup>4</sup> Even in the early 1960s, my family shopped for 'the rations', and my playground was London's bombsites.

The phrase Taylor coins in the 1940s, a 'tired horror', neatly encapsulates the weary sense of fear and loathing that pervades these texts – as with Bowen, Taylor 'feels war'. *At Mrs Lippincote's* (1945) is defamiliarized both by a series of brutal, out-of-place subtexts, and by its unsettling gothic tropes invoked by its out-of-time Brontë intertexts. Unsettling too are the sinister waxwork figures that serve to destabilise the realist framing of *A View of The Harbour* (1947). To understand such images, I look to Freud's *The Uncanny*

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Bowen's postscript to the first American edition of *The Demon Lover*, in Elizabeth Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree : Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. Hermione Lee (London: Virago, 1986). p. 95.

<sup>3</sup> N. H. Reeve, "Away from the Lighthouse: William Sansom and Elizabeth Taylor in 1949," in *The Fiction of the 1940s: Stories of Survival*, ed. N.H. Reeve and Rod Mengham (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001). p. 168.

<sup>4</sup> MacKay, *Modernism and World War II*. p. 1.



and its discourse on the 'homely' and the 'unhomely'.<sup>5</sup> Anachoristic scenes of violence and horror are also to be found in Taylor's final 1940s novel, *A Wreath of Roses* (1949). Ventriloquised through her painter-figure, Taylor articulates a furious discourse on the creative artist's proper response to horrific events. Resisting reductive conclusions, she explores the murky, shifting terrain between beauty and ugliness, good and evil. The question of the artist's response to war was a live issue at the time. In a 1946 essay, Stephen Spender writes: 'We live today in an age of overwhelming public events. These events seem to have an importance which makes many people [...] feel that they ought to be put into poetry.'<sup>6</sup> To Spender the matter is paradoxical: 'in a sense there were no war poets. [...] But in another sense, there were war poets. That is to say, the war certainly became the deeply experienced emotion which contributed to the poems of all, or almost all, the true poets writing during the war.'<sup>7</sup> It is in this sense that Taylor becomes a writer of war: this is 'the deeply experienced emotion', the 'tired horror', that suffuses her fiction of the 1940s. Her novels' inclusion of warlike happenings and behaviour exposes a growing rage that seeps between the pages, distorting their realist framing, edging them on occasion to the brink of surreality. The source of this rage and attendant despair, I suggest, emanates both from the political and the personal, and never entirely deserts her fiction even if later directed towards the plight of women, or those facing a lonely death.

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<sup>5</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Spender, "Poetry for Poetry's Sake", *Horizon*, Vol XIII, No 26, April 1946. p. 222.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 223.

The Spanish Civil War began in 1936, the year Taylor joined the Communist party. It was a time in Britain when the government was unpopular and the opposition ineffectual, shifting many socialists, including a number of intellectuals, towards the left. As Paul Laity writes, 'A Marxist view of the world was never more plausible. [...] On the horizon, socialists believed, was a very British form of fascism.'<sup>8</sup> The same year saw the launch of the Left Book Club, to which Taylor immediately subscribed.<sup>9</sup> Its articles on the Spanish Civil War in particular touched its readership profoundly; Taylor raised money for the war, gave a home to a Spanish refugee child, and assisted at a camp for refugee Basque children.<sup>10</sup> In a 1951 letter she reflects, 'I was fair wore-out [by the Spanish Civil War] and cannot take such emotional interest in a war ever again. Only cold dread.'<sup>11</sup> That Taylor's emotional interest in war, not least in the horrific events in Europe before and during the Second World War, *did* continue is evident in her 1940s novels, realised in the anger and fear embedded in the texts, and articulated through both character and narrator. According to Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner, the Jewish plight in Europe was well known in Britain before the war. While the press reported Nazi atrocities, however, little was done

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<sup>8</sup> Paul Laity, *Left Book Club Anthology* (London: Gollancz, 2001). p. xi.

<sup>9</sup> The Left Book Club, which published Marxist polemics alongside educational material, reportage, history and memoirs, would have provided Taylor with much of her political education. See Paul Laity's Introduction to *Left Book Club Anthology*. Left Book Club volumes are twice referenced in *At Mrs Lippincote's* (AML 52, 65).

<sup>10</sup> Amongst the thousands of British people who went to fight the fascists were a number of writers and artists, including George Orwell, Stephen Spender, W H Auden and Ernest Hemingway. While death tolls are disputed, they certainly reached over 200,000. See, for example, Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain: The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939* (London: Orbis Publishing Ltd, 1982).

<sup>11</sup> Taylor to William Maxwell, mid-June 1951, *The New Yorker Papers*, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 89. Taylor reflects on this in 1968: 'I wore myself out in the Spanish War, when all that fury was going on.' Nicholson, "The Other Elizabeth Taylor, Portrait of a Novelist." p. 76.

beyond urging war as a solution.<sup>12</sup> Many campaigners attempted to sway public opinion towards pressurising the British government to recognise the appalling situation ‘and from there to take whatever action was possible to help and rescue the “victims of Nazi terror”’.<sup>13</sup> Bloxham and Kushner argue that: ‘most of the details of the Holocaust [...] were known to contemporaries not just in the places of destruction but in the “free world” as well. Contemporary engagement with that information was less profound, but the processes by which it was either disbelieved or more commonly ignored and marginalised were far from simple.’<sup>14</sup>

Taylor would have learned of Nazi savagery from the socialist magazine, *Tribune*, which during the war years featured articles on concentration camps, antisemitism, and the excessive bombings of German cities. (The *Tribune* published Taylor’s first story in 1944.) It is probable she would also have read *Horizon* magazine, since a story of hers was submitted for publication (and rejected by its editor, Cyril Connolly). *Horizon* had a significant impact on the arts during and just after the war; its contributors included Rose Macaulay, Elizabeth Bowen, T S Eliot, Stephen Spender and Dylan Thomas. Amongst the poetry and fiction were political and philosophical articles, some concerned directly with the effects of war; one particularly harrowing essay written by Alan Moorehead, reported a visit to a concentration camp soon after its liberation by the British Army.<sup>15</sup> Such

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<sup>12</sup> For a comprehensive discussion of the many and complex reasons why this might be the case, see Donald Bloxham and Tony Kushner, *The Holocaust : Critical Historical Approaches* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* p. 185.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 215.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Moorehead, “Glimpses of Germany II, Belsen”, *Horizon*, Vol. XII, No 67, April 1945.

articles would certainly have provoked in Taylor feelings of shock, horror and impotence, and it is thus unsurprising she finds a way of introducing Nazi outrages into the domestic landscape of her postwar narratives. In this she was not alone: both Hamilton and Bowen, for example, address domestic fascism in their writings of the period. Yet unlike them, Taylor's anti-fascist response is fuelled by her communist leanings, even if by the time she writes her last 1940s novel she is out of sympathy with the Party's Marxist ideology.<sup>16</sup>

A personal note of anger may also be detected in Taylor's narratives, stemming possibly from her decision to end the love-affair with Russell in 1945. While their friendship continued for several years, never again would Taylor enjoy physical intimacy with a man who shared both her politics and her intellectual engagement with the arts. The loss must have been considerable, leaving her feeling isolated and even angry at the choice she felt compelled to make. Furthermore, for Taylor the personal and political collide within the domestic: while she would always have the challenge of her work, not all women were so fortunate. Her affluent mid-century Thames Valley life brought her into contact with an army of middle-class women pursuing lives of emptiness and dissatisfaction: married women without

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<sup>16</sup> Taylor finally leaves the Communist Party in 1948. She writes to Russell, 'only a cowardly feeling of hating people to say "I told you so" prevents me from leaving the party [...] Of course, what goes wrong in Russia does not damn Marxism, I know, but it makes me afraid that the machine Marxism inevitably leads to this autocracy. I do not care to help in taking such a risk'. Taylor to Ray Russell, March 1946, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. pp. 206-207. For an illuminating account of the wartime and postwar politics of Bowen, Greene, Green and Macaulay, see Lara Feigel, *The Love-Charm of Bombs : Restless Lives in the Second World War* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013). Feigel quotes from a letter from Bowen to William Plomer (24 September 1945): 'I can't stick all these little middle-class Labour wets with their Old London School of Economics ties and their women. Scratch any of these cuties and you find the governess. Or so I have always found.' p. 309.

occupation, single women trapped in unrewarding work, disappointed women with little opportunity for fulfilment. Women like these become Taylor's fictive subjects, and anger and frustration at their wasted empty lives simmer between the textual crevices of her fiction.<sup>17</sup>

Taylor's second novel, *Palladian* (1946), however, orientated towards the past, swerves away from war almost completely: while it is emblematic in the way it employs my framing concepts to destabilise reader expectation, its allusions to war are rare. A discussion of Taylor's motives for rejecting war just as peace returns is informed by Bowen's 1950 essay, 'The Bend Back'.<sup>18</sup> The trope of the 'bend back' or 'return', however, has a further function in this postwar chapter. With their ambiguous endings, Taylor's 1940s novels suggest a circularity that urges the reader to revisit their opening pages armed with the knowledge gained from first reading. Such a return can never place the reader at the same point, but only an echo of that point, thus a rereading will always produce a different reading. In practice, the process is often nearer to a downwards spiral, which resonates with the 1940s, a period replete with uncomfortable returns. Those who went to war returned to people and places altered by it; those who remained at home, especially in the cities, returned after nights in shelters to find domestic landscapes irrevocably altered. Postwar returns could never replicate pre-war lives. Furthermore, rereading is urged if the reader wishes to encounter the extraordinary, and sometimes even the horrific, dwelling amongst the

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<sup>17</sup> This theme is explored in depth in Chapter 4 when we encounter Taylor's 1960s fictive women.

<sup>18</sup> Bowen, "The Bend Back."

'everydayness' of Taylor's essentially domestic texts, not least in her first novel, *At Mrs Lippincote's*.

### ***At Mrs Lippincote's***

"The sun beating down, the veins swelling, the blackness coming up in waves, coming up to strike at the eyes. Stop!" [...] the sensation of tears yet stung at the bridge of his nose. "That's what's soft about me", he thought. Concealed in his pockets, his finger-nails drove in, now here, now there, against his palms. "It's what makes me soft at the core, and inefficient. Helpless and inefficient. Taking on too many burdens, one becomes a burden oneself. Taking on the burdens of other men's suffering. Never die other men's deaths, lest one grows unfit for one's own. A coward. Not to be a coward and yet not to become too brutalised. An acquaintance with brutality coarsens one or gives the last nudge over the edge of sanity. We can never remain ourselves when it happens." (AML, 120)

Placed at the near-centre of *At Mrs Lippincote's*, Taylor creates an understated kind of trauma writing, positioning the reader within the consciousness of a tormented minor character, a form of writing that at first seems out of place in this ostensibly domestic novel. Here we find an early example of the 'return' that becomes a constant refrain in Taylor's oeuvre. The language is repetitive: 'coward', 'burdens', 'brutality', all repeated. The Communist Leo is trapped in this linguistic circularity, condemned to revisit endlessly the appalling events he experienced in pre-war Germany, sealed in a world of emotional shock that can only ever be repeated.<sup>19</sup> To be both Jewish and a Communist was a deadly combination.<sup>20</sup> Fearing for his

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<sup>19</sup> There are echoes here of the psychological trauma experienced by Septimus Smith as a result of his First World War experiences, in Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin Books, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Bryher, in an essay entitled 'What shall you do in the war' (June 1933), writes of a 1932 visit to Berlin where she witnesses a city in terror. 'Tortures are freely employed, both mental and physical. Hundreds have died or been killed, thousands are in prison, and thousands more are in exile.' A popular German slogan of the times states: 'To be a Jew is

already tenuous grip on sanity, he struggles to reconcile his actions with his shattered self-image: 'We can never remain ourselves'. How to steer a path between cowardice and brutality, how to avoid the risk of becoming brutalised by a proximity to brutality? These are recurring questions in Taylor's 1940s novels. Repeatedly the reader is told that Leo lives a meticulous and ordered life, contrasting starkly with the disorder within his mind, a coping strategy perhaps: while he cannot control his mental world, he can at least control the physical. Notably, Leo is rendered mute by his experiences, a method of ensuring that the horror and anger never escape. Bowen writes in 1945 that '[f]oreign faces about the London streets had personal pain and impersonal history sealed up behind the eyes.'<sup>21</sup> Clearly, Leo's pain is also sealed behind his lips. Only the reader is privy to his internal ordeal, too disturbing to be voiced. Leo's inability to speak these atrocities epitomises Taylor's approach in this novel: war's effects are too terrible to be articulated explicitly. Instead, she finds another, more oblique way.

The major preoccupation of *At Mrs Lippincote's* is aptly described by Valerie Martin as 'the quiet horror of domestic life'.<sup>22</sup> Written as war was reaching its end, it is principally a study of growing disillusionment and resignation within a severely fractured marriage, a theme that was to recur in much of Taylor's

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bad, to be a Communist is worse, but to be a Pacifist is unforgivable.' James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus, eds., *Close up, 1927-1933 : Cinema and Modernism* (London: Cassell, 1998). p. 306.

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Bowen's postscript to the first American edition of *The Demon Lover*, in Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree : Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*. p. 96.

<sup>22</sup> Valerie Martin, Introduction to Elizabeth Taylor, *At Mrs Lippincote's*, Virago Modern Classics (London: Virago, 2006). p. viii.

oeuvre, and one many critics have chosen to address.<sup>23</sup> My intention, however, is to examine how Taylor inscribes the war upon this novel, how she speaks to war without speaking of it; how she articulates the ever-present dailiness of wartime, its careless cruelties, its destabilising mood of anxiety, even though no bombs fall and no battles are fought.<sup>24</sup> Uncertainty and death are prefigured in the novel's opening sentence: "Did the old man die here?" (AML, 5) War and its consequences occupy every aspect of the narrative landscape: at the level of genre, where the anachronistic gothic framing that invokes the supernatural establishes an air of disquietude and fear; in its treatment of place and explicit textual references to wartime experience; and most importantly in a series of peculiarly brutal 'subtexts' that speak to the belief that war has the capacity to brutalise those it touches. What may be missed initially is just how angry and disturbing these anachoristic scenes are, and how crucial they are to an understanding of the text. Indeed, at first reading these 'subtexts' could be construed as simply minor textual diversions.

Michael Riffaterre, however, argues against such a construal. He describes 'subtexts' as 'texts within the text that are neither subplots nor themes but diegetic pieces whose sole function is to be vehicles of symbolism. They offer a rereading of the plot that points to its significance in a discourse closer to poetry than to narrative.'<sup>25</sup> They are 'those narrative units of

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<sup>23</sup> See, for example, Leclercq, *Elizabeth Taylor*; Hartley, *Millions Like Us : British Women's Fiction of the Second World War*.

<sup>24</sup> The narrative, however, includes the explosion of a metaphoric bomb in its exposure of a secret love-affair that damages everyone it touches.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore ; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). p. xvii.



significance that account for readers' ability to find their way unerringly in fiction.' Offering a different kind of truth, 'a poetic truth', they point to ways of reading, 'hermeneutic guideposts'.<sup>26</sup> As Riffaterre argues, 'the detail represents truth itself, uninterpreted existence, [...] simply because no narrative motivation for it is imaginable, no hint that it could serve the purpose of encoding an intention, of manipulating the reader in view of the novel's telos.'<sup>27</sup> It is the persistence of the subtext that underpins the novel's hermeneutic power: what seems insignificant singly builds to significance as further subtexts appear in the narrative: 'each of them signifies in terms of the previous one and all are recognizable as variants of one another.'<sup>28</sup> The cumulative effect of Taylor's anachoristic textual images serves to defamiliarize moments of everyday homeliness, prompting a realisation that a closeness to brutality inevitably brutalises.

Set in a provincial town where the air force trains its officers, *At Mrs Lippincote's* offers a portrait of a largely domestic, non-combatants' war, reinforced by the incongruous image of the commanding officer unselfconsciously knitting a sock in the officers' mess – knitting not fighting, creating not destroying.<sup>29</sup> Further, we are informed with a touch of irony that Roddy, the protagonist's husband, leaves each day for his *office* 'to earn the Sunday dinner and defend his country.' (AML, 43) Yet aspects of wartime infuse the text: soldiers, sailors and airmen provide a backdrop to numerous

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pp. 54-55.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 63.

<sup>29</sup> According to Beauman, the inspiration for the novel's setting came from Taylor's own wartime experience of living with her RAF officer husband for a brief period in a Victorian house in Scarborough. See Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. pp. 111-114.

scenes, the nights are subject to the eeriness of the blackout, and fire-watching is in operation. When it rains, it rains 'bullets'. Moreover, the bombs of London are not so far away: Julia, the novel's protagonist, imagines bombed-out Soho in terms of 'planks lying across rubble, the dust, the faded wallpaper and pink willowstrife growing among the masonry.'<sup>30</sup> (AML, 97) And reliving the awfulness of the Blitz, her friend, Mr Taylor, comments: "You get up in the morning with your stomach tender from the fear you've been in all night." (AML, 101)

A general air of unease is articulated through the novel's anachronistic gothic framing, underscored by a panoply of Brontë novel allusions, bringing the past into the present. While *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *Villette* (1853), *Agnes Grey* (1847), and *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) are all referenced, it is the intertext *Jane Eyre* (1847) that explicitly informs this self-consciously literary work: the Lippincotes' house comes complete with tower and locked attic-room, 'haunted' by a mentally-disturbed young woman. In her book, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War* (2010), Sara Wasson examines war through the lens of the gothic in the London-centric works of writers such as Henry Green and Elizabeth Bowen.<sup>31</sup> Such an examination can usefully be extended to wartime fiction located beyond the metropolis, not least to Taylor's first novel. Early gothic fiction can be distinguished, according to Kelly Hurley, 'by its supernaturalist content, its fascination with social

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<sup>30</sup> In a discussion of Rose Macaulay's novel *The World My Wilderness* (1950), Leo Mellor writes of the centrality to the novel of London's jungle-like bombsites, where species of colonised flowers are listed with 'taxonomic precision'. Leo Mellor, 'The new London Jungle', in *Reading the Ruins: Modernism, Bombsites and British Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Wasson, *Urban Gothic of the Second World War : Dark London*.

transgression, and its departure, in formal terms, from the emerging norm of realism.<sup>32</sup> Since its inception, elements of the gothic have seeped into various literary forms, as gothic genre shifts to gothic mode, mixing and blurring different discourses, including the more realistic fiction of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Its longevity, Jerrold E Hogle argues, can be attributed to 'the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural'.<sup>33</sup>

To say that gothic fiction is a liminal form is to recognise its uneasy positioning throughout history between the so-called 'serious' and 'popular', 'high' and 'low' culture. But it is also to recognise its concern with the boundaries between a number of binaries, including, as Hogle notes, 'life/death, natural/supernatural, ancient/modern, realistic/artificial, and unconscious/conscious – along with the abjection of these crossings into haunting and supposedly deviant "others"'.<sup>34</sup> That Taylor's domestic fiction of the Second World War might appropriate the gothic is thus unsurprising. Gothic's preoccupation with the uncanny and the abnormal, with fear and doubt, suggests a fruitful method of investigating within fiction the mental and physical disruption of those living under war's dark clouds: the contingency of life and death, strained relationships, the disorientating blackout, bombings

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<sup>32</sup> Kelly Hurley, 'British Gothic fiction, 1885-1930', in Jerrold E Hogle, ed. *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). pp. 190-191. Early Gothic can be described in terms of plot (typically, the imprisoned young heroine), theme (violence, anger or madness,), setting (the graveyard or haunted castle), style (sensationalist language and a mood of menace), along with a desire to engender anxiety or fear in the reader (due to the physical or psychological haunting of the characters by apparitions or monsters).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* p.4.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

and burnt-out buildings, and pre-eminently, a persistent destabilising anxiety. 'Uncanniness', writes Nicholas Royle, 'entails a sense of uncertainty and suspense, however momentary and unstable.'<sup>35</sup>

It is to engender just such an estranging mood that Taylor injects a number of gothic tropes and allusions into *At Mrs Lippincote's*. Such tropes are deployed primarily to foreground the ominous in the everyday, an everyday disturbed by the continuing presence of war. Yet the text, while hovering on the threshold of the supernatural, never quite strays across the limen. Even as the traditional gothic tropes of ruined abbey, graveyard, swirling mists, haunted house and an ethereal presence are all present, they never fulfil their sinister promise, except in so far as they instil an air of menace. As Julia approaches the town's Abbey ruins, she imagines 'a dark, Gothic, ivy-covered place in which, under some crumbling archway, she might meet the Wing Commander, with the bats swinging [...] and a white owl hooting' (AML, 94). Instead, she finds children playing happily amongst the ruins. Nevertheless, the text refuses to shut down entirely the possibility of the paranormal: as Julia leaves, the 'silence in the ruins [...] was ominous, discounting the centuries, reminding one of the swift passage of time and of mortality.' (AML, 97) This ambivalence towards the uncanny is suggested as the novel opens: 'The dead cannot communicate with the living, or do harm to them. Julia believed that: *there are, of course, those who do not.*' (AML, 5, my italics)

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<sup>35</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny : An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). p. vii.

Clearly, the text's use of the gothic is equivocal: though at times ironic, the Brontë intertext cloaks the novel in a nineteenth-century interpretative framework of fear and foreboding. Julia even has her own Mr Rochester in the 'dour' figure of the Wing Commander, whose love for everything Brontë he shares with her and her son: "If you had a long cloak [...] and whiskers [...] then you'd be Rochester to the life", she tells him (AML, 48).<sup>36</sup> That Julia feels no affinity with her temporary home, no sense of belonging, is plain. The house presents a dark, brooding space that seems to be watching her. A notion of the uncanny is introduced early in the text when Julia, already in a heightened state of dread at being alone at night, sees from the garden 'a white curtain fluttering in the topmost window of the turret [...] like a palely gloved hand' (AML, 38). A more emblematically gothic image is difficult to envisage, and one that again evokes *Jane Eyre*. It is but a small step to believing a spectre is occupying the house.

In his famous 1919 essay, Freud observes that the uncanny 'belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread.'<sup>37</sup> Linking its origins back to childhood fears – of ghosts, spirits and dead bodies – Freud claims that, though we no longer believe in the supernatural, traces of belief remain that can still disturb us. He concludes: 'the uncanny element we know from experience arises either when repressed childhood complexes are revived

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<sup>36</sup> Humble examines middlebrow fiction's fascination with the Brontë myth during the first half of the twentieth century, in Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. pp. 176-183.

<sup>37</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*. p. 123. Taylor read Freud while at school: she noted dismissively in her diary, 'I am reading Freud. It only seems to be things I know already....'. Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 36. And there are two references to Freud in *At Mrs Lippincote's*, both referring to dreams: the first when Julia dismisses "all that nonsense about Freud [...] Dreams just happen [...] It doesn't mean anything." (AML, 78); and the second when she says "You are trying to remember what Freud and those chaps would say." (AML, 168).

by some impression, or when primitive beliefs that have been *surmounted* appear to be once again confirmed.’<sup>38</sup> Though a rational woman, Julia is living through times sufficiently unsettling to expose her to irrational childhood fears. We are soon disabused of any paranormal activity, however, as the spectre proves to be the prosaically-named Phyllis, the mentally-challenged daughter of the house and Julia’s *doppelgänger*. Nonetheless, from this moment on a state of uncanniness infects the narrative, blending the familiar with the strange, and problematising the text’s realist framing. Phyllis remains a troubling presence, materialising unannounced in ghostly form, collapsing past and present, ordinary and yet extraordinary.

Freud discusses in ‘The Uncanny’ the role of the double, concluding that its ‘uncanny quality can surely derive only from the fact that the double is a creation that belongs to a primitive phase in our mental development [...] The double has become an object of terror’.<sup>39</sup> While Jane Eyre’s double, Bertha, is just such an object, Julia’s soon ceases to be. Rather, the doubling device is employed to foreground by contrast Julia’s deep feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction. Phyllis has the key to the attic-room, a symbol of freedom, and can move in and out of her former home at will, at a time when freedom is a rare commodity, and something Julia has relinquished. Deeply proper, Phyllis appears in a clean white coat, unlike her double whose white coat has ‘a fine bloom of dirt upon it.’ (AML, 7) Indeed, they are at opposite ends of numerous dualities: married–single, rebellious–compliant, experienced–

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<sup>38</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*. p. 155.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 143.

innocent, intelligent–simple. Unlike her conformist husband who deplors Phyllis’s impromptu visits, Julia greets her with sympathy and understanding. Moreover, Julia finally gets to enter the locked attic-room where Phyllis, a Miss Havisham-figure, is discovered dressing for an imaginary dance. ‘A wardrobe door stood open showing a long line of crushed-up party dresses, the colours of sweet-peas [...] Across the bed and floor was a litter of ribbons and velvet flowers and scarves.’ (AML, 157)

This vision of softness and femininity is the antithesis of Julia’s more practical self. Yet Julia envies her: Phyllis is an anachronistic presence drawing an innocent peacetime past into a hostile present, a house of conflict. Phyllis has escaped life’s mundane realities: the misery of wartime, the disappointment of married life. And unlike Julia, whose occupation of the house could only ever be transitional, Phyllis truly belongs, evidenced by her swift return on the day Julia and Roddy leave to return to a semblance of their former life, their brief period of residence wreathed in failure. Frozen in time, Phyllis is destined never to progress beyond the delights of wedding-planning, never to enter the murky world of marriage. And it is truly a murky world. At the end of the narrative the reader learns what Julia has discovered at the start: her husband is having an affair, and everything that has occurred since has been coloured by this discovery. The literary device of withholding information until a later stage invites a rereading of the novel, one inflected by this revelation.

As with *Jane Eyre*, Julia is only ever a liminal figure within Mrs Lippincote's house, haunted by ghosts of the past – by the death of Mr Lippincote in whose bed she must now sleep, and by the presence of the Lippincotes' wedding photograph bearing down 'disdainfully' upon her failing marriage. Like Jane, Julia transgresses the boundaries of conventionality, rejecting the traditional role assigned her as officer's wife. And like Jane, she is outspoken, uncompromising and unwilling to conform unquestioningly to societal norms. The displacement caused by occupying a stranger's house is, according to Humble, 'emblematic of both the social and psychological disruptions of wartime'.<sup>40</sup> Julia's state of homelessness precipitates feelings of isolation and disconnectedness that shape the text: "To myself, I seem like a little point of darkness with the rest of the world swirling in glittering circles round me. How I long to draw some of the brightness to me!" (AML, 110) Later there is a scene of utter strangeness as Julia momentarily separates from her body, visualising herself at her own funeral, and contemplating 'what a cross-section of her thigh would look like' (AML, 186, 187). Such a jarring, anachoristic moment returns us to the image of the scalpel within the kid glove of domestic realism, although here the scalpel has a more literal role. As Jacqueline Rose observes in an essay on the war-inspired fiction of Mary Butts and Bowen, '[b]odies, among other things, become too present to themselves'.<sup>41</sup> In almost two pages of narrated thought and free indirect

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<sup>40</sup> Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s : Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. p.112. For an examination of the effect of war on ideas of domesticity and homeliness in *At Mrs Lippincote's*, see Brannigan, *Orwell to the Present : Literature in England, 1945-2000*. pp. 35-37. However, his conclusion that the novel 'endorses conservative notions of femininity and social relations in many respects', is one with which I cannot agree. p. 37.

<sup>41</sup> Jacqueline Rose, "Bizarre Objects: Mary Butts and Elizabeth Bowen," *Critical Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (2003). p. 79.



discourse, Julia confronts her existential fears while contemplating her non-being in a moment of Cartesian duality: “Oh death!” she thought, looking down the length of her body. “For this – so familiar, so reassuring to me, to become familiar and reassuring no longer, to be destroyed! [...] I could not believe in it ever not *being*.”<sup>42</sup> (AML, 186) Stemming perhaps from Taylor’s experiences of war, together with her atheistic beliefs, such existential despair is a recurrent theme within her fiction.

If wartime’s underlying mood of fear and despair is articulated through the text’s gothic thematics, then the horror of war is propelled into the everyday via a series of anachoristic subtexts, out-of-place scenes that depict the barbarities of which man is capable, together with their dehumanising consequences, thereby inviting a fresh interpretation of Martin’s ‘quiet horror of domestic life’. That these scenes are located in the domestic suggests no one is immune. Rereading may be necessary to capture the full impact of these subtexts, for it is their sustained quality that supplies their hermeneutic function. Confronting the reader is a series of cruel, increasingly defamiliarizing moments involving insects and dead animals that sit uneasily within a domestic realist frame:

They were musing over an early wasp which Roddy was shortly to kill, though Julia did not know that and would ineffectually protest when he did. It had shaken itself free of a piece of cobweb, which already contained a few dead flies, and now went through a kind of ancient ritual, bowing and stroking its great antlers [...] with its crossed forelegs.

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<sup>42</sup> Freud points out in ‘The Uncanny’ that despite knowing that we must all die, ‘it is obvious to no one; our unconscious is still as unreceptive as ever to the idea of our own mortality’. Hence religion offers the notion of an afterlife. Julia, however, has no religion. Freud, *The Uncanny*. p. 148.

“What a monster he is!” said Julia, and it was then that Roddy squashed it [...] (AML, 34).

In its choice of metaphors to describe the wasp’s movements, the text invokes the image of a majestic deer of the forest performing its primeval rituals, a creature moreover that is frequently killed for sport. Already freed from its spidery prison, the wasp is preparing itself for flight, until stopped in its tracks by the gratuitous violence of the aggressor, Roddy. To counter Julia’s evident admiration for the tenacious wasp, Roddy must demonstrate his egregious power as she looks on impotently; ‘ineffectual protest’, of course, was what most non-combatants were reduced to in time of war. In his ‘Thoughts for the Times on War and Death’ part 1 (1915), Freud provides an explanation for man’s barbarity in wartime at both individual and collective levels.<sup>43</sup> Though referring specifically to the horrors of the First World War, Freud might be speaking of the Second; indeed, in a 1995 essay, Samuel Weber makes a forceful case for the relevance of Freud’s essay to more recent conflicts: ‘One of the most striking aspects of Freud’s essay [...] is its renewed timeliness.’<sup>44</sup> Freud speaks of a non-combatant’s sense of ‘disillusionment’ in wartime, a sense that flows through Taylor’s 1940s texts. According to Freud, such disillusionment stems from two sources: ‘the low morality shown externally by states which in their internal relations pose as the guardians of moral standards, and the brutality shown by individuals whom, as participants in the highest human civilization, one would not have

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<sup>43</sup> “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death, 1: The Disillusionment of the War” (1915), in Freud et al., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*.

<sup>44</sup> Samuel Weber, “Wartime,” in *Violence, Identity, and Self-Determination*, ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997). 80-105, p. 85.

thought capable of such behaviour.<sup>45</sup> During peacetime, society imposes ethical standards on the populace and is not too concerned over whether man internalises such standards or merely abides by them. When these standards are lifted in wartime, ‘there is an end [...] to the suppression of evil passions, and men perpetrate deeds of cruelty, fraud, treachery and barbarity’ hitherto thought impossible.<sup>46</sup> Leclercq’s observation that Roddy ‘is presented as a staunch supporter of Darwin’s theory of survival and shows contempt for the poor, the weak, and the unsuccessful’ is, I suggest, an inadequate reading of this scene.<sup>47</sup> While war’s savagery may be located far away, it nonetheless leaches into Taylor’s domestic spaces.<sup>48</sup>

In a second, more troubling subtext, Julia is unsuccessfully swatting an invasion of flies even as she discusses her soul with an unwelcome visiting vicar. Beginning in playful fashion, the scene takes a darker turn when she responds to a question on fly-papers with a diatribe on the brutalising consequences of cruelty.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Freud et al., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. p. 280.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p. 280. See the full essay for Freud’s psychoanalytic theory to explain such behaviour.

<sup>47</sup> Leclercq, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 16.

<sup>48</sup> A similarly violent image is created in Woolf’s *Between The Acts* (1941), although in this case the violence could be said to relieve suffering. Giles comes upon a snake: ‘Dead? No, chocked with a toad in its mouth. The snake was unable to swallow; the toad was unable to die. [...] So, raising his foot, he stamped on them.’ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Vintage, 2005). p. 62.

<sup>49</sup> Taylor was to reuse the fly-paper metaphor to conjure an unsettling mood of anticipated violence in a 1969 short story, ‘The Fly-Paper’. She may have been influenced by Mansfield’s meditation on cruelty entitled ‘The Fly’, written in the 1920s. Whether Taylor had read Kafka’s *The Trial* is uncertain, but she did read some Kafka: he is listed in her *Commonplace Book*. As K resists the grip of the two men who eventually execute him, ‘[t]he image of flies tearing their legs to get away from the flypaper occurred to him.’ Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (1925), trans. Mike Mitchell (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2009). p. 162.

“No, they’re so cruel. Imagine it! Striving to free oneself until the legs leave the sockets. This way is bad enough. Contemplating brutality makes you used to it. It’s a way of saving our reason – of putting armour over one’s nerves. If I really imagined what I’m doing now, I couldn’t do it. It is the first step towards committing atrocities on human beings. At first, you are nervously repelled, then take it for granted, then look to it for excitement and, finally, for pleasure and ecstasy. [...] This morning I read in the paper about something vile the Nazis did, and I thought: ‘It’s all right. It’s not as bad as the atrocity I read about last week.’ [...] The contemplation of brutality brutalises.” (AML, 173-174)

The inclusion of this powerful defamiliarizing passage troubles the novel’s domestic framing. Drawing an incongruous line directly from the humble fly preparing to sacrifice its legs on a fly-paper to Nazi atrocities, the text travels beyond acts committed in the name of war into the abyss of man’s limitless capacity for cruelty, unafraid to voice the excitement, the pleasure, the ecstasy even, of committing such acts. That these ideas are ventriloquised through Julia, the moral centre of the novel, and include the second-person pronoun, suggests that no one can claim immunity from such brutalisation.<sup>50</sup> By allowing such cruelty to seep into a scene of utter ordinariness to animate a moment of moral outrage, the text extends towards the surreal – the surrealism of the everyday.<sup>51</sup> And rage and despair push between the textual interstices. Freud’s ‘homely’ becomes ‘unhomely’: he describes the uncanny as a phenomenon that occurs when the familiar, the homely [*Heimlich*] merges with the unfamiliar, the unhomely [*Unheimlich*]. Taylor takes the seemingly safe, familiar setting of home within the seemingly safe, familiar form of domestic fiction and renders it strange, unsafe and uncanny. According to Freud, such fiction misleads ‘by promising us everyday reality

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<sup>50</sup> For a discussion of this scene in relation to *Tristram Shandy*, see Ernest Boll, "At Mrs Lippincote's and *Tristram Shandy*," *Modern Language Notes* 65, no. 2 (1950).

<sup>51</sup> At around the same time, Angus Wilson drew barbarity into the domestic sphere in his horrific short story, 'Raspberry Jam' (1946).

and then going beyond it'.<sup>52</sup> As Royle argues, there 'has to be a grounding in the rational in order to experience its trembling and break-up'.<sup>53</sup> Clearly, Taylor's writing engages with the uncanny in more ways than its gothic framing and settings: it recasts commonplace happenings as peculiarly violent instants of war, forcing the reader to contemplate afresh life's savagery.

The final scene to be examined complicates still further the threshold between reality and surreality, while blurring the distinction between the literal and figurative. By defamiliarizing a familiar scene of mundanity – a butcher's shop window – Taylor constructs a tableau of carnage redolent of the disquieting distortions to be found in Francis Bacon's visceral paintings:

Flies gathered over shallow trays of blood, dotted the tripe folded up like blankets. [...] It was a welter of reds – the brown-red of the blood, the deep red of beef and the paler red of mutton, the bluish red of a bunch of carnations in a jam-jar, a rosette of scarlet between a pig's ears. She looked at the pallid, lecherous dead face, posed there with its rosette, the folds of flesh drawn into a sneer, the suggestion that it caricatured humanity. But behind it and all round, the shop flashed and swam with garnet, with ruby and amber. (AML, 180)

That the scene is viewed through a shop window suggests that the horror is there for all to see, just as Nazi atrocities were openly documented in the wartime press. The butcher's slab with its grotesque description of the sneering pig's head suggests an aerial view of a battlefield strewn with the bloody parts of dead soldiers, even as an aesthetic gaze appreciates the

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<sup>52</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*. p. 157.

<sup>53</sup> Royle, *The Uncanny : An Introduction*. p. 25.

visuality of a shop bejewelled 'with garnet, with ruby and amber' and the subtle shades of red: 'brown-red', 'deep red', 'paler red', 'bluish red' and 'scarlet'. Like all flowers, the carnation evokes a notion of beauty, but the choice of carnation is particularly disturbing. Sharing an etymology with carnage, 'carnation' derives from the Latin for flesh, *carnis*, but is also an acknowledged symbol of love. Thus, paradoxically, the carnation embodies beauty and happiness even while it suggests ugliness and violence. By dragging the grizzly dreadfulness of war into a quotidian scene, and juxtaposing highly incongruous objects, the text challenges the reader to confront such dreadfulness: tripe in blankets, carnations (flesh) in a jam-jar, a rosette between a pig's ears. (What prize has it won?) If the 'lecherous' pig's sneer is caricaturing humanity, the text suggests human beings are sneering, but at what? At man's failure to halt such acts of carnage perhaps.

The fly appears symbolically in all three scenes, first dead in cobwebs, then fighting for its life, and finally, feasting on the blood of the dead. And in an earlier scene the image of the feasting fly is brought into the domestic heart of the novel when Julia imagines her own dead body providing a meal for flies: 'She felt them crawling on her face, in a leisurely way, as if she were a corpse.' (AML, 173) Indeed, the text offers a pessimistic view of human nature: the fly will survive long after the human race has destroyed itself. As Julia observes, "[t]hey say that when you kill a fly, two more come to its funeral." (AML, 173) In this her first novel, written during the war within the comparative safety of the Home Counties, her husband away and her lover a

prisoner of war, Taylor substantiates Katherine Mansfield's famous assertion: 'the novel can't just leave the war out.'<sup>54</sup>

Yet as noted above, war is very nearly left out of Taylor's second novel, one that in many ways seems out of place amongst her 1940s fiction. Lacking both temporal and spatial specificity, the narrative barely gestures towards the cataclysmic events of the decade. In *Palladian* Taylor treads a different path, choosing to reimagine the anachronistic country-house drama of an earlier age. Its title foregrounds a concern with façades, outward appearances, and yet the façade of the country house is disintegrating, exposing the dysfunctional lives of those within. Examining life between the cracks is, of course, a constant preoccupation within Taylor's oeuvre. There are, however, a few implicit references to war in *Palladian* – the gothic framing, for example. I have already illustrated how gothic tropes, however playfully introduced, instil a sense of fear and uncertainty that provides a commentary on war.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the ink drawings of ugly, dismembered and dissected bodies discussed in the previous chapter might hint at battlefield carnage or bomb-damaged bodies laid out in a morgue. And near the end of the narrative there is a more explicit allusion to wartime when a character comments: "It is an odd world where the young die so much and the old live so ruinously long." (PAL, 188)

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<sup>54</sup> Katherine Mansfield in response to Woolf's *Night and Day*, C. K. Stead, ed. *The Letters and Journals of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Penguin Books, 1977). p. 147.

<sup>55</sup> While Henry Green also largely circumvents war in his 1945 novel, *Loving*, returning to the near-timeless era of the grand country-house drama, he chooses the trope of eyes to speak to the unsettling, uncertain times.

Nevertheless, a major theme of the novel is the sense of the end of an era, the end of a certain kind of England and Englishness, allegorised by the spectacle of the Palladian house's imminent collapse even as its inhabitants pass their lives within – lives that must change irrevocably as the house sinks into the earth. Let us revisit the passage from the end of the novel cited in the previous chapter: 'As soon as grass grows in the rooms and moles run waveringly down passages, the house is not a house any more, but a monument, to show that in the end man is less durable than the mole and cannot sustain his grandeur.' (PAL, 187) This is no nostalgic yearning for an idealised past, no mourning for its impending demise. On the contrary, the text celebrates and even delights in the anticipated transformations: the moment when the house will cease to exist, defeated by the industriousness of insects and animals, ably assisted by the burgeoning plant life, all busy and energetic, unlike the representative of the old order who owns the house – the effete and ineffectual upper-class Marion Vanburgh, a man who passes his days reading the classics. The natural world will bring to an end this life of advantage; the humble working-class mole will triumph over the privileged classes. I suggest the passage is heralding – and furthermore welcoming – the changes to come: the postwar Labour government, the rise of the working class, the welfare state.

In *Palladian*, therefore, Taylor does not entirely retreat from postwar politics even if she largely omits the war itself; in writing as peace was finally restored she perhaps wished briefly to escape war's privations. Yet her decision led to self-doubt: 'At no other time would writers have fretted



because they did not belong to their age. It is something which the Marxists have bred in us.<sup>56</sup> That the immediate postwar period was a time of acute austerity and continuing fear for the future may have added to a fleeting desire to flee the present. Bowen's 1950 essay, 'The Bend Back', discusses contemporary writing's desire to retreat into a fictive past: 'Nostalgia is not a literary concoction', writes Bowen, 'it is a prevailing mood'.<sup>57</sup> It seems that for reasons both literary (a 'sort of recoil' from the sophistication of modernism) and societal (a flight from the bleakness, blandness and uncertainties of the present), readers and writers are drawn not to the actual past, but to an illusory one, to a kind of writing that once again touches the heart.<sup>58</sup> Arguing that their predecessors managed to reach an accommodation with their own time, Bowen urges contemporary writers to do the same, to return to the present and 'examine the stuff of our own time [...] Our time, being part of all time, holds within it something essential which needs divining, perceiving'.<sup>59</sup> Taylor's remaining 1940s novels take up Bowen's challenge. In an explicit homage to Woolf, she returns in *A View of the Harbour* to the immediate postwar moment, ready to approach war's aftermath, even if once again she places it in the gaps between the novel's central themes of marital disharmony, infidelity and betrayal. It is in the text's evocative postwar setting and its tropes of spying and fear that we find

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<sup>56</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell, March 1946, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 161.

<sup>57</sup> Bowen, "The Bend Back." p. 54.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p. 58-59. Ian Baucom supports such a view when he argues that: 'Melancholy and loss are among the most privileged tropes of a romantic and postromantic canon of English letters, as is the image of the backward-glancing English man or woman'. He cites examples from the works of Conrad, Woolf and Forster amongst others. Ian Baucom, *Out of Place : Englishness, Empire, and the Locations of Identity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999). p. 175.

<sup>59</sup> Bowen, "The Bend Back." p. 60.

reverberations of war, reflecting a mood Bowen calls the ‘uneasiness in the present’.<sup>60</sup>

### ***A View of the Harbour***

In this world of darkness  
So we shall shine  
You in your small corner  
And I in mine. (AVH, 115)

The words of this hymn sung by a small child nicely encapsulate the themes to be explored within *A View of the Harbour*: the ‘darkness’, at once bleak and sinister, of the postwar world; the light that separates and exposes individual characters; and the ultimate loneliness of the lived experience. My analysis in this section is shaped by the concept of anachorism, enabling an examination of the part played by the novel’s seemingly out-of-place elements in establishing a potent mood of anxiety and mistrust. Furthermore, the approach allows me to focus on the novel’s outsider-figure, deployed to exemplify the careless brutality of war. Located in the transitional space between war’s end and the start of any tangible recovery, the action of the novel takes place along the claustrophobic harbour-front of an unfashionable seaside resort, hemmed in on one side by water and on the other by a row of buildings. As Reeve notes, the ‘whole place seems caught between phases’.<sup>61</sup> While explicit references to war are few, its aftershocks are ever-present – in the shabbiness of buildings and the drabness of the lives within. Indeed, the world of the novel ‘offers a poor

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 59.

<sup>61</sup> Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 37.

haven to the lonely, the dying, the divorced and the widowed', suggests Hartley.<sup>62</sup>

A postwar feeling of loss, mourning and isolation predominates, troubled by a more sinister Cold War theme signalled in the novel's title – watching and being watched, spying and being spied upon. That Taylor is looking back to Woolf's seminal text, *To The Lighthouse*, is evident in her appropriation of the lighthouse trope. Indeed, the phrase, 'Lo! said the lighthouse' (AVH, 25) is an incongruous refrain in the novel, more Woolf than Taylor, revealing an instance of Woolf's 'think[ing] back through our mothers'.<sup>63</sup> As in Woolf's text, the lighthouse takes centre stage, its potency as a unifying force plain: it is 'the pivot' (AVH, 10). Structurally, its beam reinforces feelings of separation, spotlighting each character only to return him to the lonely shadows. Thematically, its role is more ominous: like a spy, its beam insinuates itself into windows, lingering, disturbing, then passing on, engendering feelings of 'terror and desolation' in the war-widow, Lily Wilson (AVH, 13). Together with the figural use of eyes and windows, the beam conjures a disquieting mood of suspicion and fear – of the unknown, of death, of loneliness, of tedium, of lives wasted.

Additionally, the beam acts as a camera lens giving the novel its distinctly cinematic feel. Taylor made a sketch of the harbour-front locating every building, vividly imagining 'who lived in which house, and how their paths kept crossing in an intricate pattern. [...] I see it rather as a film, with

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<sup>62</sup> Hartley, *Millions Like Us : British Women's Fiction of the Second World War*. p. 199.

<sup>63</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. p. 76.

constantly shifting camera angles'.<sup>64</sup> The entire novel has this quality, reflecting her preference for scenes over what she termed 'boring transitional passages'.<sup>65</sup> As Reeve observes, 'the narrative is laid out in a kind of montage of more or less rapid cross-cutting from scene to scene'.<sup>66</sup> And as the textual camera sweeps the seafront, images of postwar decay and scruffiness are brought into sharp focus. We learn parenthetically that 'there had been a war on' as 'coils of rusty barbed-wire' are being removed from the beach (AVH, 11). A grimy notice still hangs defiantly in the local pub: "We Do Not Recognise The Possibility of Defeat" (AVH, 19).

Yet the town of Newby *has* been defeated. If Taylor's novel is a reimagining of *To The Lighthouse*, it is a bathetic one. While the view of the harbour from the sea is still 'picturesque', close up it becomes 'dingy'. Despite its name, Newby is the old town, outdated, a virtual ghost-town, replaced by a shinier model just around the Point, with its 'white hotels [...] broad esplanade and the gardens and pier; all planned and clean and built for pleasure.' (AVH, 39) It is as if the tide of war has retreated and left behind in Newby life's detritus: darned stockings, 'cracked, riveted plates' in the old furniture shop, 'strings of faded postcards' in the tobacconists (AVH, 36), 'dejected, hanging frocks' in the second-hand clothes shop (AVH, 11). Mice droppings fill the windows of the closed waxworks, and shutters obscure the fun fair. Indeed, the fun fair, a vestige of carnival that had retreated over the centuries to the geographic and cultural margins of society, now finds itself in a site so unfashionable that

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<sup>64</sup> Taylor, "Setting a Scene." p.70.

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth Taylor, *Housewife* (September 1953), quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 170.

<sup>66</sup> Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 41. A similar point was made by Austen, "The Novels of Elizabeth Taylor." p. 259.

it fails to open even when summer arrives, compounding the sense of abandonment felt by the waterfront community. John Brannigan speaks of an 'anti-littoral aesthetic', arguing that the novel demythologises the popular belief in the seaside as a place of pleasure in the 1940s.<sup>67</sup> In postwar Newby there is to be no escape, even briefly, from life's daily dreariness – no penny slot-machines, no distorted mirrors, no fun.

*A View of the Harbour* offers multiple points of view, both visual and psychological. Consciousness slips between characters in this polyphonic novel where even minor figures add significantly to a discourse on the condition of postwar provincial England. From their separate thresholds, everyone watches everyone else; eyes are everywhere. As the novel opens, the newcomer, Bertram, is given an oddly unlikely perspective on the waterfront when his field of vision shifts from the harbour buildings at large to pinpoint just one house, then a woman leaving the house, and finally a small white jug she is carrying. From the outset, then, a feeling of strangeness is instilled, together with the uncomfortable notion of spying: only through binoculars could such a perspective be gained. The war may be over, but the more clandestine Cold War is just beginning. And while Bertram watches the harbour, it 'in its turn, observed Bertram.' (AVH, 12) 'This man they half-suspected. [...] They watched behind curtains from shop and house, and Mrs Wilson [...] wondered if he was a spy, forgetting that the war was over.' (AVH, 12-13) (For Lily Wilson, the war is far from over.) Thus a threatening atmosphere of universal surveillance is established, reinforced by the text's

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<sup>67</sup> John Brannigan, "(there had been a war on)": Late Modernism and the Littoral Imagination in Elizabeth Taylor's *A View of the Harbour*". Paper delivered to the Elizabeth Taylor Centenary Conference, Anglia Ruskin University, 7 July 2012.

treatment of two minor characters, the incomer, Bertram, and the war-widow, Lily – predator and prey.

A study in human solitude, Lily exemplifies the experience of many women in postwar Britain: in dilapidated surroundings she exists with little money, few friends and no husband. Further, she lives in a continuous state of fear. While Taylor's characteristically wry humour lightens the tone at various points in the narrative, it never rests upon Lily. Marooned in Newby, she is forced to live amongst the shabby, tired waxworks that have been in her husband's family for generations. Through these waxworks – and in particular their chillingly 'glittering eyes' – the text conjures a strong notion of the uncanny. As Reeve comments, the waxworks bring to the novel its 'only moment of full-blown Gothic'.<sup>68</sup>

Mrs Wilson locked the bedroom door against the ghostly company downstairs. When Bob was alive she had not minded; now she was ever conscious that they stood grouped there, unmoving, eyes glittering as the lighthouse beam winked upon them, their arms crooked unnaturally or knees flexed slightly in everlasting informality, [...] the unfamiliar faces of forgotten murderers turned to the door, Mrs Dyer, the baby-farmer, with dust upon the backs of her hands. [...] she prayed that sleep might carry her through safely to the morning. (AVH, 26)

In these waxwork scenes, uneasily and anachoristically positioned within this essentially domestic narrative, Taylor again takes the familiar and defamiliarizes it, fashioning a haunted realism that hugs the borders of surrealism. The literal blends with the figurative as a collection of waxwork murderers fixed in unnatural poses point hostile gleaming eyes towards the

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<sup>68</sup> Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 37.

door – grim static figures only a lighthouse-beam's 'wink' away from movement, a wink that suggests a menacing collusion between beam and waxworks, as if the beam, like Frankenstein, has an uncanny life-giving power. And perhaps the waxworks are not so static: 'knees flexed slightly' suggests a readiness for action; and 'turned to the door' is an ambiguous phrase, at once a position and a movement. Indeed, as Lily enters the house, 'the lighthouse swung its beam over the room and the eyes of the waxworks seemed to flicker into life, so that she felt as if they were all standing there waiting for her.' (AVH, 48-49) And these are no innocuous celebrities of the past, but effigies of brutal murderers that, together with the waxworks' grisly panorama of tortures, point to the atrocities committed in the name of war.<sup>69</sup>

Freud refers to a sense of the uncanny being generated by doubt as to whether an apparently inanimate object might possibly come alive, simulacra such as dolls, automata and waxworks. It is, of course, one thing for children to imagine dolls in the toy-room moving about at night; it is quite another for Lily to imagine forbidding replicas of history's killers coming alive and ascending the stairs to her bedroom, a fear undoubtedly real to her. Returning home one night, she 'moved quietly as if there were those inside who slept. When a mouse stirred [...] fear rushed through her, she felt as if fingers were locked tightly round her ankles.' (AVH, 107) Despite the sensational nature of such images, they remain chilling. Seen in the safety of daylight, however, the waxworks lose their uncanny quality. In reality they

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<sup>69</sup> Amelia Dyer was hanged in 1896 for baby murder. In 1890 Madame Tussaud featured in the Chamber of Horrors the famous murderer Eleanor Percy who killed her lover's wife and baby. It was an extremely popular exhibit.

are seedy and outmoded like everything else in this marginalised town, disappointing the few visitors who seek pleasure in terror, causing Lily still further anxiety: how to survive on the meagre takings the waxworks generate.

Fear runs like a river through the narrative: fear of dying, fear of living, fear of wasting a life in Newby. This heightened mood of anxiety within the domestic looks back to the unsettling period of war on the home front – fear of bombs, of destruction, of losing loved ones – even as it anticipates the Cold War just beginning. Reading allows Lily a moment of escape, yet even here she is thwarted. First she must confront the creepy librarian seated in his crepuscular library fingering the books lasciviously, feigning disgust at the depravity of their contents. Taylor evidently enjoys animating such an unsavoury character, one who ‘had a habit of running his tongue between his lips so that they were perpetually moist between his moustache and beard.’ (AVH, 237) Indeed, the library scenes are comically melodramatic and yet oddly sinister. A bluebeard-figure, the librarian might at any moment imprison Lily within his gothic chateau: ‘The narrow Gothic windows excluded sunshine, the fusty smell was sharp as the slash of a knife as Lily pushed open the door and entered, coldness, darkness falling over her.’ (AVH, 237) Within the mundanity of a library building, Taylor injects a moment of strangeness redolent of the final scene of *Palladian*, not least its motif of the slashing knife. As coldness and darkness enclose her, the fragile Lily might be a reimagining of *Palladian*’s lop-sided hen.



It is when she takes to visiting the pub out of loneliness that Lily encounters the anachoristic figure of Bertram, destined to destroy her tenuous grip on respectability. A retired naval officer and talentless amateur artist, Bertram drifts aimlessly into Newby on the pretext of wanting to paint the harbour, a seemingly harmless, inquisitive man. Filled with self-importance and self-delusion, he is reluctant to acknowledge his lack of artistic talent. For Bertram, though a tireless observer of people, has no artist's eye and from the outset his limited visual imagination is plain. In an echo of Lily Briscoe, he takes his sketch-book and draws 'a line across the middle of a page' (AVH, 10), achieving only a poor sketch, however. (In an ironic scene, his water-colour is shown to improve when placed under a running tap.) As the text's principal spy-figure and near-villain, Bertram insinuates himself into the lives of many of Newby's residents 'like a fish weaving its way through weeds' (AVH, 101), anticipating the stranger – and murderer – Richard Elton in Taylor's next novel, *A Wreath of Roses*, as well as the manipulative spy, Harrison, in Bowen's 1948 wartime novel, *The Heat of the Day*. Unlike these later creations, however, Bertram's chief motivation is simply inquisitiveness and a misplaced belief in his own goodness. There is a clear disjunction between who Bertram is and who he imagines himself to be; his curiosity rarely turns inwards.

Motivated by a desire to be recognised as a good man, he meddles in Lily's life with devastating consequences. Fascinated by the waxworks, he reveals an unhealthy and bizarre knowledge of past murderers, recognising Crippen,

Thompson and Bywaters, and Mr Rouse (AVH, 52).<sup>70</sup> As predator to Lily's defenceless prey, his conduct proves to be little short of mental torture, prefigured in his unwholesome interest in the waxwork display of tortures. Early in the narrative his true nature is revealed: 'When he was kind to people he had to love them; but when he had loved them for a little while he wished only to be rid of them and so that he might free himself would not hesitate to inflict all the cruelties which his sensibility knew they could not endure.' (AVH, 54) While there is a blurring here between free indirect speech and diegetic comment, the phrase 'would not hesitate to inflict all the cruelties' is surely the sharp, censoring voice of the narrator, injecting a flash of restrained anger into the text.

Arnold Van Gennep observes that, for 'a great many peoples a stranger is sacred, endowed with magico-religious powers, and supernaturally benevolent or malevolent.'<sup>71</sup> While the text reveals Bertram to be at once benevolent and malevolent, it is his malevolence – his malicious treatment of Lily – that prevails. Yet she endows him with near-magical powers for good, hoping he will transform her miserable life: "surely he will help some miracle to happen to me before he goes" (AVH, 96). Bertram fills her home with his presence, treating her belongings in a peculiarly intimate manner, his portrayal as a harmless, helpful visitor destabilised by a counter image as a disturbing, almost uncanny character whose presence differs little from the waxworks: he 'was everywhere in her house and whispered from every

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<sup>70</sup> Dr. Crippen, was hanged in 1910, for the murder of his wife. Edith Thompson and Frederick Bywaters were executed in 1923 for the murder of Thompson's husband Percy. Alfred Rouse was hanged for murder of an unknown man in 1931.

<sup>71</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960). p. 26.

corner' (AVH, 97). In making himself indispensable Bertram causes Lily great harm, for boredom is another of his traits. Soon exhausting her limited stock of curiosity appeal, he moves on to court his next victim, Tory, a woman who, unlike Lily, matches him for selfishness. Lily is alone once more, and the narrator's angry disapproval of Bertram is plain, not least in the phrase, 'of course': 'He had always had great confidence with women [...] only when he had gone, their fears, their anxieties returned, a little intensified, perhaps, but he, of course, would not know of that, and remained buoyed up by his own goodness.' (AVH, 138)

Curiosity dominates Bertram's life. Shamelessly he gains people's trust in order to discover their secrets, 'a passion for turning stones' (AVH, 206). Tory pictures him as 'a goatish sort of man, [...] a mischievous, a prying kind of man', inviting comparison with the devil; indeed, he describes himself as 'devilish' lazy (AVH, 102). His interior landscape is a fog of self-deception, lifting only rarely to allow moments of insight: 'In the end I always move on somewhere else, as all selfish people do, who do not let themselves become deeply involved in others, nor bound to one place. For all I feel is curiosity; and curiosity [...] is quickly satisfied, a fleeting thing, leading nowhere.' (AVH, 206) What is 'nowhere' to Bertram, however, is likely to be a dark abyss for Lily. After her abandonment, she reaches her nadir: 'Whatever I do, however I sink my pride, I'll go mad if I ever have to be alone here again.' (AVH, 149) Thus this respectable widow is driven to being propositioned by a French sailor, witnessed by the prying eyes of both Bertram and an old gossip: 'at that moment her reputation was slipping into that no man's land from which

one can fall, with so little warning, from respectable widowhood to being the local harlot' (AVH, 209-210). Again the narrator censures Bertram: 'He thought [...] of Lily Wilson, of how in the beginning he had inferred perhaps that he would do much for her. And he had done nothing. (*He did not know that he had done worse than nothing.*)' (AVH, 224, my italics). That he did not care is unvoiced but implied.

It is not overstating the case to align Taylor's articulation of the Bertram–Lily dynamic with the domestic fascism animated by Patrick Hamilton in his wartime novels, *Hangover Square* (1941) and *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947), even if in Taylor's text the familiar cliché 'killing with kindness' is ironically suggested. With a hint of *schadenfreude*, Bertram congratulates himself on a narrow escape: "Well, I compromised myself there [...] If all I hear of that girl is true. I should never have believed it, scarcely *can* believe it, either. It is amazing how one can be so mistaken about people." (AVH, 310) Only Bertram could fail to see the irony in this final sentence. For reasons of mutual self-interest Bertram and Tory agree to marry, yet marriage between these two self-interested people does not augur well, and once again the antagonistic narrator exposes Bertram's character:

He feared the unhappy, the possessive, the single-minded, the intense, and was gallant, rather than tender; flirtatious, but not loving. He was also rather a coward and, because he thought he saw Tory drowning, felt it safer not to notice, lest, forced to go to her rescue, he might be involved in her struggles and dragged down to depths he had no wish to visit. (AVH, 229)

Rage and resentment churn between the fissures of the text, emotions that stem from Taylor's own hatred of cruelty and injustice, whether in the name of war or within the domestic sphere. Reeve highlights this rage in his discussion of Taylor's 1940s novels, pointing to 'the flashes of anger breaking out of these texts every so often and lighting them up.'<sup>72</sup> When Russell read the novel's early chapters, he surprised Taylor with his antipathy towards Bertram – perhaps even she was unaware of its simmering hostility. She asks in a letter: 'Why do you hate Bertram? Because he is a hypocrite? Or more than that. How can you so early on tell that he is a harmful old man? Something ghoulish.'<sup>73</sup>

In its postwar setting and its tone of fear and uncertainty, *A View of the Harbour* speaks plainly and despondently to the pragmatism of the times; it is a 'make do and mend', second-hand world. Only Lily must make do with less than second best. Yet while she is an obvious victim from the outset, the reader may at first fail to register Bertram as the malignant presence he becomes – Leclercq, for example, interprets him as 'slightly ludicrous'.<sup>74</sup> Given that he first befriends Lily, insinuates himself into her life, abandons and discredits her, and finally congratulates himself on his lucky escape, 'slightly ludicrous' is an understatement. With close reading, anger can be detected in the narrative's denunciation of Bertram's behaviour towards the town's weakest resident. As is typical in a Taylor text, between the cracks in the tragicomic theatre of the everyday lurk fury, darkness and despair. In

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<sup>72</sup> Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 38.

<sup>73</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell, March 1946, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 169.

<sup>74</sup> Leclercq, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 35.

taking her scalpel to these two lesser characters, Taylor draws into the domestic the kind of careless cruelty inflicted in time of war. In her last and darkest 1940s novel, *A Wreath of Roses*, this textual anger and despair bubble to the surface.

### ***A Wreath of Roses***

Making daisy-chains in the shadow of a volcano (AWR, 119)

When Taylor comes to write *A Wreath of Roses*, she is both appalled and exhausted by the 'tired horror' of war. Again she introduces anachoristic scenes of violence into the domestic, now in the form of savage paintings created by her troubled artist-figure, Frances, who rails against wartime atrocities. Woolf's influence, in particular her novel, *To The Lighthouse*, is palpable; allusions to Lily Briscoe abound. Just as Woolf is struggling in her novel to find an adequate response to the First World War, so Taylor is attempting something similar with regard to the Second. Both choose an indirect approach, Woolf famously confining references to war within terse parentheses in the lyrical 'Time Passes' section. Yet where Lily has her 'vision' at the novel's conclusion, drawing the line that completes her painting to her utter satisfaction, Frances, is offered no such epiphanic moment.<sup>75</sup>

Beginning and ending with a violent suicide, the circular narrative is infused with an undercurrent of menace prompted by the presence of another

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<sup>75</sup> Taylor refers to Lily Briscoe 'putting that final dark line on her canvas' in a letter to Elizabeth Bowen, 24 February 1955. Elizabeth Bowen Collection, Harry Ransom Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. Accessed February 2011.

dissembling, anachoristic figure, a man who has murdered once and may yet murder again. Indeed, the novel is the nearest Taylor comes to writing a form of thriller. Entwined with this theme, however, is a second narrative strand, one that enacts the text's most significant confrontation with the dreadful consequences of war. *A Wreath of Roses* was to be Taylor's most personal and self-reflexive novel, and without doubt her most desolate and angry, one with which she wrestled to the point of despair, according to Beauman, even contemplating its destruction. For it is in this text, at this pivotal historical moment, and voiced by the elderly artist, Frances, that Taylor struggles most explicitly to crystallise her thoughts on the complicated dialectic between art and life, on the intrinsic value of painting and writing: should the creative artist respond to apocalyptic events? Is it even possible? Or is it sufficient to believe in art for art's sake? Such is the pessimism of her views at this time that she might almost be anticipating Theodor Adorno's devastating pronouncement of 1949: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.'<sup>76</sup>

A member of English PEN at the end of the 1940s, Taylor attended several meetings in London. While it is unclear when she first joined, it was possibly much earlier, when at her most politically active. PEN was established in 1921 to promote literature as a means of increasing understanding between different cultures. It championed human rights and writers' freedom, and during the turbulent 1940s its members debated the question of a writer's

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<sup>76</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society," in *Prisms: Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981). p. 34.

response to war.<sup>77</sup> Such debates also took place in the socialist and communist press, and within Communist Party meetings. That Taylor engaged in such discussions in the early 1940s, wrestling with the art/life dichotomy, is apparent in her correspondence with Russell. In these early 1940s letters she appears to promote the 'art for art's sake' argument, but her vehement protestations suggest an attempt to convince herself. At one point she notes: 'we talk too much cock about writing & painting. We ought to think less about it, have fewer theories ...Sod it all, I now think, I will write what I bloody will, & not worry whether or not it reflects the times.'<sup>78</sup> Looking back on her early years in the Party, she observes in 1943: 'The company I have got into since I was grown-up has been ... bad for my writing. It took away what I had & gave me nothing in exchange. [...] it made me ashamed of the sort of talent I had, so that I stifled it'.<sup>79</sup>

Clearly, in her discussions with her comrades, the prevailing belief was that literature should serve the needs of the Party. This Taylor could not do: 'you write because you must, not because it would be a useful thing to do'.<sup>80</sup> And she observes in 1943 of literature in general: 'What it does *not* do is reflect contemporary history. All the great novels shriek this to the housetops ... Only private life there, how this & that person lived.'<sup>81</sup> Yet even as Taylor's

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<sup>77</sup> One exiled writer, Hilde Spiel, writes: 'what the PEN club did for us cannot be sufficiently praised ... the Germans, the Austrians, the Czechs, then the rest of the refugees from Hitler's Europe ... were all taken to the hearts of a succession of motherly women and selfless men, made welcome'. *The Dark and the Bright: Memoirs 1911-1989*, trans Christine Shuttleworth (Riverside, California: Ariadne Press, 2007) p. 107, quoted in Feigel, *The Love-Charm of Bombs : Restless Lives in the Second World War*. p. 78.

<sup>78</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell, 1943, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 89.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. p. 89.

<sup>80</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell, 1942, quoted in Ibid. p. 126.

<sup>81</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell, 1943, quoted in Ibid. p. 126. There was, of course, much fiction published that foregrounded the experiences of war, whether at home or abroad. The many



texts foreground private life – ‘how this & that person lived’ – they nonetheless inhabit their historical moment. While far from ‘political’ in the sense of engaging directly with either party politics or the grand political narratives of the day, Taylor’s novels are nonetheless ‘political’: she develops more nuanced ways of drawing current political debate into her fiction. In *A Wreath of Roses*, this proves to be both an emotional and intellectual challenge: Taylor writes to Russell in 1948 that this novel is to be ‘her personal statement about life, that all beauty is pathetic, that writing is like Ophelia handing out flowers, that horror lies under every leaf.’<sup>82</sup> She feared the disapprobation of both reading public and publisher, however. To Russell, when halfway through the novel, she writes despairingly:

I am worried about my book. I have turned my back on all that people liked in my other novels – the light thrown on little daily situations [...] and there is nothing funny, no wit, no warmth, no children, no irony [...] It is *deadly serious*. Horribly sad. Cold. Everyone will hate it. [...] I have come out of my range – a great mistake – and have swept in violence, brutality, passion, religion, all the things that had been better left out.<sup>83</sup>

In both form and content – in the painterly, impressionistic quality of the writing and in its discourse on art – *A Wreath of Roses* owes more to Woolf than any of Taylor’s novels before or after. As critics have observed, Frances, in her tortuous grapple with the meaning and value of her art, is an elderly Lily Briscoe.<sup>84</sup> Taylor’s painterly scenes are a literary manifestation of

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literary magazines that flourished at the time were replete with wartime stories – *Horizon*, the *Tribune*, *Penguin New Writing* amongst them.

<sup>82</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell, April 1948, quoted in *Ibid.* p. 211. This image occurs in the text (AWR, 165).

<sup>83</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell, October 1947, quoted in *Ibid.* p. 202.

<sup>84</sup> See, for example, Reeve, "Away from the Lighthouse: William Sansom and Elizabeth Taylor in 1949." p. 166.

Frances's early aesthetic, where she captures 'the everyday things with tenderness and intimacy' (AWR, 34). To give just one example of how style and subject are fused – of how Taylor crystallises ephemeral moments of beauty – here is a literary painting that echoes Woolf's style, the word 'picture' emphasising its visuality:

Liz replaced the stopper in the decanter, and stood there, very still; the sunlight coming in diamonds through the lace curtains chequered and broke up the picture of her, flashed in the wine, spilt over the carpet and revealed the tawny wreaths lying on the pink. Gold dust drifted upwards through the imprisoned sunshine, but nothing else moved (AWR, 78).

Yet Taylor does much more than simply paint exquisite pictures. *A Wreath of Roses* is a 'deadly serious' novel of binary oppositions and, more particularly, the troubling, uncomfortable space between. It is also a novel of façades and what is concealed behind them. What we discover is that goodness masks wickedness, lies flourish behind truth, beauty conceals ugliness, and reality is commingled with fantasy. In fact, 'horror lies under every leaf', underscored by the novel's epigraph from Woolf's *The Waves* (1931): 'So terrible was life that I held up shade after shade. Look at life through this, look at life through that'. This is 'spoken' by Rhoda who ultimately kills herself, prefiguring the suicides in Taylor's text.

The principal theme is a form of murder mystery, a battle between truth and fantasy enacted by a young woman, Camilla, and a menacing, good-looking stranger, drawn together at a train station as they witness a suicide. Richard proves to be a more dangerous version of *A View of the Harbour's* outsider-

figure, Bertram. Beneath the surface of this ersatz war-hero is a cold-blooded killer whose psychopathic behaviour – the pleasure he gains from acts of cruelty – began in childhood. Now he misses the brutality permissible in war. Unusually for this ambivalent narrative, Richard's polarised personality reveals few shades of grey: his superficial charm conceals only wickedness. Ignorant of his true character, and in an echo of *At Mrs Lippincote's*, Camilla excuses him on the grounds that “[y]our acquaintance with brutality has brutalized you.” (AWR, 113) And her dormant sexuality is awakened, as attracted as she is repelled. Ultimately theirs is a prelapsarian struggle, yet before Eve succumbs to the serpent's temptation, he kills himself. In an enactment of Taylor's literary method, Camilla uncovers malevolence within the outwardly ordinary: ‘Parting the leaves to look for treasure, love, adventure, she inadvertently disclosed evil, and recoiled.’ (AWR, 173) Reduced to its skeletal frame, the main plot with its neat circular ending allows goodness to prevail. In this it juxtaposes oddly and uneasily with the more complex and largely inconclusive fight between good and evil, the lovely and the unlovely, that is articulated in the subplot.

This centres on Frances's anguish over her painting, a theme that connects with both Nazi atrocities and the terrible consequences of dropping nuclear bombs. Animating a series of debates between Frances and her admirer, Taylor gives voice to her own conflicted views on the value and purpose of the creative act in face of such brutality. That these debates end ambiguously suggests how deeply Taylor was affected at this time, clearly struggling to situate art within this cruel world. Indeed, this is perhaps her

most equivocal novel. The major and minor themes are entwined, however, as both have at their heart the unhappy battle between goodness and wickedness, beauty and ugliness, and given the tonal darkness of the text, beauty is unlikely to be the clear victor. As Camilla reflects, '[u]gliness has the extra power of making beauty seem unreal, a service beauty seems rarely able to return.' (AWR, 111)

The narrative centres on three women who were once close but are now enisled by their separate anxieties. There is a feeling that the best has passed – the time uncomplicated by marriage, motherhood and war – and the future unknown and uncertain. The fear of lives wasted that we encountered with Julia in *At Mrs Lippincote's* and with the waterfront inhabitants of *A View of the Harbour*, is manifested once more. Camilla fears an empty future, a monotonous middle age, and over the years has encased her emotions in armour-plating to avoid further disappointment. Her best friend, the ingenuous and vulnerable, Liz, marooned in a disappointing marriage to a sententious vicar reminiscent of Austen's Mr Collins, feels unequal to the task of caring for her new baby. And Frances, Liz's childhood governess, is old and frail and facing an existential crisis. Hopelessness and depression, motherhood and marriage, illness and impending death now separate them: "three unhappy women under one roof." (AWR, 120)

Each year the girls anticipate with pleasure their summer holiday with Frances, but this year is to be different, probably their last. Taylor sets up in the opening sentence the soporific, somnambulant mood of a long hot

postwar summer: 'Afternoons seem unending on branch-line stations in England in summer time.' (AWR, 7) While the characters are stultified by the oppressive heat, there is a sense that the exhaustion pervading the narrative follows in war's trail, a 'tired horror' Reeve refers to as 'atrocious-fatigue'.<sup>85</sup> Establishing a sense of ambivalence and contradiction – of things and people being other than they seem – the opening self-reflexive paragraph signals how the text should be read: 'Such trains as come only add to the air of fantasy, to the idea of the scene being symbolic, or encountered at one level while suggesting another even more alienating.' (AWR, 7) Just as with Taylor's earlier novels, this one gains from rereading. Indeed, in her review of the novel, Bowen recommends 'two readings; then, perhaps, a return'.<sup>86</sup> Between the fissures of this disquieting narrative seethe undercurrents of ugliness and malevolence – and fury pushes through. Camilla's reaction to the shocking suicide she witnesses instils a sense of foreboding in this death-inflected text: 'She experienced a moment of fear and recoil, introduced by that happening, but related to the future as well.' (AWR, 9) Moreover, the train that causes the first suicide appears as a leitmotif at various points, a *memento mori*, suggesting death is never far away.

Death plainly surrounds the artist-figure, Frances. The text's discourse on the purpose of the creative act in time of war – whether art should face outwards or inwards, depict life's ugliness or its loveliness – is allegorised in a series of dialogues between Frances and Morland, encapsulating the dichotomy Taylor was herself wrestling with at this time. Frances's despair

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<sup>85</sup> Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 9.

<sup>86</sup> Elizabeth Bowen, *The Tatler and Bystander*, 6 April 1949.

rages through the narrative taking outward form in her fierce piano-playing and her slobbering, badly-behaved dog, Hotchkiss, with his 'blood-tinged eyes' and undesirable habits.<sup>87</sup> Forced to earn her living as a governess, Frances was never truly happy until retirement when she could at last devote herself to her art. Like Richard she lived a double life, acting a part, revealing her true self only in private. Beyond the threshold of her studio she was prim and old-maidish, deploring any sign of 'Bohemianism', but within she threw off her 'governessy' ways and concentrated on her painting (AWR, 70). Capturing the quotidian was her passion, creating beautiful domestic interiors redolent of Bonnard or Vuillard, paintings that attempted less to reproduce objective reality than dream-like impressions of reality. Everything was sacrificed for her art – husband, friends, social life, children – but all this she did willingly. Then war stole into her oasis of a studio, bringing with it barren anachoristic visions of wartime atrocities, precipitating a crisis of confidence in her artistic vision: "We go on for years at a jog-trot [...] and then suddenly we are beset with doubts, the landscape darkens, we feel lost and alone, conscious all at once that we must grope our way forward for we cannot retrace our footsteps." (AWR, 58)

In the year before the novel's setting, no longer able to shut her studio door on the carnage that was war, Frances creates four paintings of futility, ugliness and negativity. Where once she had envisioned only beauty, now she sees its antithesis, and her work becomes 'abstract, incoherent, lost' (AWR, 34). Painting from 'an inner darkness, groping and undisciplined'

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<sup>87</sup>Reeve suggests Hotchkiss may be named after a famous machine-gun designer. Reeve, "Away from the Lighthouse: William Sansom and Elizabeth Taylor in 1949." p. 168.

(AWR, 81), her new images are “black and grey and purple and sulphurous [...] awful rocky pictures [...] the sun wheeling round, violent cliffs and rocks, figures with black lines round them” (AWR, 26). They are later described as depicting ‘the white bones of the earth and dark figures scurrying against a violet sky.’ (AWR, 121) Such brutal, visceral images invoke a post-apocalyptic world – post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima, post-Nagasaki. Reeve observes that Frances attempts ‘to turn herself from a Vuillard into a Francis Bacon’, although Graham Sutherland’s stark, angular ‘thorn’ paintings would seem to offer a closer analogy. That Frances is driven, as Reeve contends, ‘more by therapeutic than by aesthetic needs’, however, is debatable.<sup>88</sup> She has not chosen this new style as a form of therapy; rather, it has forced itself upon her. After a violent internal struggle on the nature and function of art, she feels compelled by ‘the terrible things we do to one another’ to acknowledge the worthlessness of painting with ‘tenderness and intimacy’. Indeed, she questions the very point of art:

“I committed a grave sin against the suffering of the world by ignoring it, by tempting others with charm and nostalgia until they ignored it too. [...] I always felt [...] that life’s not worth living; that I could only contemplate little bits of it and keep my sanity; and those bits I selected carefully – the sun on a breakfast-table, girls dressing, flowers ... [...] Life’s not simplicity [...] It’s darkness and the terrible things we do to one another [...] And paintings don’t matter. They are like making daisy-chains in the shadow of a volcano. Pathetic and childish.” (AWR, 118-9)

The counter argument to Frances’s dismissal of her former style as self-indulgence is provided by Morland, an outsider-figure given an authoritative voice in the text. He challenges her attempts to accommodate world events

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid. pp.165 and 166.

within her creative vision, valuing her earlier paintings, her visual clarity, precisely *because* they had always focused on the ever-present particular. Her paintings do have purpose and value, he argues: their existence had sustained and nourished him as a prisoner of war, transcending the encroaching darkness. “That *is* life. It’s loving-kindness and simplicity, and it lay there all the time in your pictures, implicit in every petal and every jug you ever painted.” (AWR, 119) Moreover, they were the inspiration for his own successful career in cinema. Niamh Baker argues that Morland ‘has done what many male critics have done to women artists: tried to restrict them to their femininity.’<sup>89</sup> Yet the text is not making a gendered point: if Frances’s art is ‘feminine’, then so is the art of the painters cited in the text – all male. ‘Feminine’ reflects a quality in their painting, and indeed a quality Morland aspires to within his own creative work. He urges her to return to her former aesthetic because it is ultimately life-affirming.

In a symbolic gesture Frances turns her ferocious paintings to the wall and, allowing Morland, Satan-like, to tempt her, returns to her earlier style to create one final impressionistic composition, in part because she cannot bear the brutal pictures to be her legacy: violence and ugliness must not be her final statement. Yet she fails to overcome her sense of futility and the half-finished painting is faced to the wall alongside the others, both beauty and ugliness rejected. ‘She stared down at the creamy-pink and yellow picture, half a mirror with reflected hands lifting a wreath of roses [...]. “It is like Ophelia handing out her flowers,” she thought. “The last terrible gesture but

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<sup>89</sup> Baker, *Happily Ever After? : Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain, 1945-1960*. p.152.



one.” (AWR, 165) A contradictory symbol, the rose-wreath with its sharp thorns conjures images of pain and death even as it suggests softness, love and beauty, epitomising the dichotomy articulated in the text. Is capturing beauty in fleeting moments within the domestic sufficient? And if not, what should replace it? Though Frances despairs of the aesthetics of ugliness, the aesthetics of beauty cease to be viable in the aftermath of war. Taylor’s text thus refuses Frances the satisfaction Woolf’s allows Lily Briscoe.

Frances’s inconsistency fuels the novel’s ambivalent tone. Reassessing the importance of art to her life, her thoughts are conflicting: “My work is my love [...]. My consolation, and refuge. In the midst of other people, against the thought of death, of war, I turn the secret page in my own mind, knowing that though I seem to have less than others, in reality I have more than ever I bargained for.” (AWR, 149) Yet these thoughts postdate her fierce paintings, when clearly out-of-place images of war and death *have* invaded the ‘secret page’ in her mind; she was not untouchable. Later she reassures herself: “It *has* been a nice life [...] I *did* always do what seemed right to me at the moment. I *was* happy. I never consciously spared myself or kept anything meanly back, and when I die, I’ll know I spent it all, the life I was given.” (AWR, 149-150) But the repeated emphases suggest an attempt to persuade, and swiftly following these pronouncements are doubts about her life: ‘I was too self-sufficient, as if I evaded the pain and the delight of human relationships [...] if I was ever gravely at fault, I was at fault over that. For even Liz’s marriage is better than no marriage at all.’ (AWR, 150) As Reeve notes, ‘sometimes she tells herself that her painting is her true joy,

sometimes that its cost in lost human intimacy has been too great, sometimes that what she has produced is not only worthless but corrupting'.<sup>90</sup> Frances's assertions on the value of an artistic life are so contradictory that her textual authority is undermined.

Yet it is an oversimplification to contend, as Leclercq does, that 'Frances's earlier vision was a fraud'.<sup>91</sup> It is equally reductive to suggest, as Jane Brown Gillette does, that the novel reveals 'that pretty deceptions conceal the true horror of life'.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, Gillette asserts that, while Morland seems a voice of dissent initially, his 'fear of life' is 'merely another, more graceful way of stating the inadequacy of art'.<sup>93</sup> In this 'unpleasant novel', she concludes, the artist simplistically rejects the value of art and Taylor 'collaborates in the rejection'.<sup>94</sup> The text's argument is more nuanced than these critics allow, however. As Clare Hanson observes, 'Frances's negative view of her art is [...] strongly challenged by the text. It is made clear that it stems from a despair which is almost suicidal'.<sup>95</sup> Illness, exhaustion and old age plainly contribute to Frances's sense of futility and hopelessness. Doubt overwhelms her, a doubt that suffuses the narrative: "Other men and women will paint over our work [...] soon brown gravy will cover them [...] and the embalmed words of the great will count for no more than Liz and Camilla chattering" (AWR, 100-1). Hanson interprets the text more optimistically, arguing that '[w]hat Taylor's text suggests is that [...] "everyday things" and

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<sup>90</sup> Reeve, "Away from the Lighthouse: William Sansom and Elizabeth Taylor in 1949." p.165.

<sup>91</sup> Leclercq, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p.37.

<sup>92</sup> Gillette, "'Oh, What a Something Web We Weave': The Novels of Elizabeth Taylor." p.100.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* p.100.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* p.101.

<sup>95</sup> Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions : The "Woman's Novel" in the Twentieth Century*. p.82.

the art which depicts them cannot be dismissed as shades and illusions: they are/they represent the stuff of life, which must always be lived in and through its contingency and materiality.<sup>96</sup> Even so, the text is challenging the sufficiency of this aim. In the wake of appalling world events is this simply 'making daisy-chains in the shadow of a volcano'? The question the text – and Taylor – is posing is can and should art respond to ugliness as well as beauty, and if so how is this to be achieved?

There is to be no unequivocal response to the art/life dialectic in this novel, and it falls to Morland to mediate between the two disparate positions. While Frances attempts the separation of loveliness from unsightliness, good from evil, the text argues that such an ambition is impossible. Even as Morland favours her former style, he acknowledges the interconnectedness of goodness and wickedness: "Beauty and corruption touch us – at the same time, in the same place. Not separately, as in Frances's pictures [...] the truth contains them both. The search for beauty, lays bare ugliness as well." (AWR, 158) Furthermore, the unresolved relationship between beauty and ugliness manifests itself within Frances's paintings, where a leitmotif, juxtaposing the charming images, is the unattractive, untouchable cactus, 'like a signature.' (AWR, 17) The cactus, of course, while forbiddingly barbed on the outside, is all softness within. Frances's legacy, if indeed she has one, is to be loveliness and ugliness both. That things are not always as they seem, that within the unlovely may lie beauty, is also suggested in the figure of the dog. Hotchkiss is a slobbering, smelly, Caliban-like creature

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. p.82.

and yet a devoted, reassuring companion. Such a notion is further advanced in a discussion between Camilla and Liz. In another metafictional enactment of Taylor's literary style, Camilla describes hunting for a lost ball and finding between the ferns a toad, "sitting there, very ugly and watchful. All the time there, though you didn't know it, under the leaves." (AWR, 27) Liz's response, however, is that toads can be beautiful. The text is clearly arguing that goodness and evil, beauty and ugliness must reach an uneasy accommodation. Refusing reductive dualities, it speaks to the equivocal space in between.

Both in the reality of postwar drabness and in a moral sense, life is shades of grey. What the text leaves uncertain is the artist's response within this muddied landscape, perhaps because there is no authoritative response: 'An honest painting would never be finished; an honest novel would stop in the middle of a sentence. There is no shutting life up in a cage, turning the key with a full-stop, with a stroke of paint.' (AWR, 154-5) This statement subverts the tidy circularity of the main plot in which Richard's death signals an end to wickedness. Such a neat *dénouement* runs counter to the inconclusive discourse on the purpose of art in the disturbing presence of evil. Frances is denied the satisfaction of drawing a final 'stroke of paint'. No such satisfaction is possible in the 1940s: neither art nor writing can ever find an entirely fitting response. As Reeve observes, 'there is no faith in summings-up'.<sup>97</sup> Yet while the text 'stops in the middle of a sentence' with regard to the creative artist's role, it offers a glimmer of hope in the figures of

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<sup>97</sup> Reeve, "Away from the Lighthouse: William Sansom and Elizabeth Taylor in 1949." p. 167.

Liz and her baby, those open to life, those who seek peace: “Life persists in the vulnerable, the sensitive, [...] *They* carry it on. The invulnerable, the too-heavily armoured perish. [...] Dinosaurs and men in tanks. But the stream of life flows differently, through the unarmed, the emotional, the highly personal ...” (AWR, 57). Just as Frances attempts to leave as her final statement a mark of optimism, so too the text – yet neither quite succeeds. Unlike the uplifting mother-child scene between Louie and her son, Tom, that draws Bowen’s wartime novel, *The Heat of the Day*, to a close, Taylor’s text concludes with violence – the death of a murderer. Taylor’s last 1940s novel, written when most alive to the atrocities of war, is truly her bleakest and most conflicted.

## **Conclusion**

While it is an overstatement to categorise these three novels as war novels, given the absence of explicit war themes and locations, my analyses in this chapter have demonstrated that such a categorisation is not wholly without merit. More apposite, of course, is to describe them as ‘in-the-wake-of-war’ novels, which locates them both temporally and thematically – and indeed, emotionally. Whereas a privileging of the small-scale and the quotidian is the foundation of Taylor’s literary aesthetic, it is not its entirety. If readers take Bowen’s advice to reread these texts, they will find war and more particularly war’s aftershocks reverberating through the narratives, not in the principal themes, but pushing through the fissures of her version of domestic realism, and seeping in from the textual margins. They are there in genre, in

theme, in the treatment of place, in tone. While the aftermath of war is made explicit in the novels' backdrops, it is in atmosphere and tone that the effects of war are more clearly invoked. A dark postwar mood of surveillance, shabbiness, austerity, exhaustion and tedium infuses the texts, a world of second-best. And fear is omnipresent, fear of the past, of the future, and most particularly of the present.

This state of anxiety and menace is summoned by the inclusion of anachronistic gothic tropes, with their suggestion of the supernatural, which ruffle the borders of the texts' realist framing, edging them towards the realm of the surreal, signalling that all is not what it seems. And death is ubiquitous. Anachoristic strangers, at once charming and threatening, reveal themselves capable of acts of egregious cruelty, even murder. To engender an atmosphere of dread, a sense of the uncanny is invoked in the form of intimidating waxworks of murderers and torturers, and more disturbingly, in anachoristic scenes of savagery created by defamiliarizing everyday images of domestic life. The evils perpetrated by man must not be ignored. Freud's 'homely' becomes the 'unhomely'. The textual message is insistent: a proximity to brutality brutalises, even within the domestic; no escape, no immunity is possible.

Rage at such cruelty punctures the narrative, deforming Taylor's realist frame. Just as the horror of war invades Frances's studio, so too Taylor's domestic landscape. In writing these war-inflected novels, Taylor concludes that art must engage with the atrocities of war, yet questions whether her

own creative response thus far has been sufficient. As with her artist-figure, Taylor's confidence in her abilities is undermined. In these three novels, she acknowledges the troubling interconnectedness of goodness and wickedness, beauty and ugliness. Just as Frances's impressionistic paintings are shown to include the harsh cactus within their everyday scenes of beauty, so too Taylor's fiction; even as art captures the charming, it must peck between the textual cracks to seek out the unlovely. Refusing reductive binaries, Taylor, in three of her 1940s novels, speaks to the muddled and muddied space between, attempting to find an accommodation between two diametrically opposed views. While Taylor fails to resolve unequivocally the artist's dilemma in these novels, her engagement in the intellectual process may perhaps have been sufficiently cathartic to allow her to leave the subject behind as she enters the next decade, the 1950s.

## Chapter 3: The Domestic Servant

### Introduction

“Do you really dare to suggest that I should demean myself doing for a useless half-wit of a girl what she could perfectly well do for herself; that I should grovel and curtsy to someone of my own age; dance attendance on her; put on her stockings for her and sit up late at night, waiting for her to come back from enjoying herself?” (ANG, 46)

The sentiments, if not the mode of expression, revealed in this tirade set in 1901 might more fittingly be associated with a young woman of the 1950s, a time when the position of lady's maid had all but disappeared from England. The eponymous heroine of *Angel* addresses her Aunt Lottie in the haughty, extravagant phrasing of her latest sensationalist invention, *The Lady Irania*, for she envisions a very different 'vocation' for herself (ANG, 46): not invisible servant to her namesake, Angelica, but celebrated novelist. The passage reveals much about the uncompromising Angel's sense of her own superiority and self-worth while simultaneously pointing up the moral absurdity of a late-Victorian domestic world in which 'a half-wit of a girl' can have her stockings put on by a girl of similar age; that one girl can enjoy a life of leisure and idleness alongside another who works every waking hour, simply because one is rich and the other poor. In *Angel*, Taylor employs the figure of the prospective servant to articulate a stark denunciation of the conduct of Paradise House's upper-class inhabitants. And in so doing, she allows the servant-figure considerable authority in the text, a practice she maintains throughout her thirty-year literary career.



In this chapter Taylor's fictive domestic servants are placed under the interpretative lens of my dual concepts, anachronism and anachorism. Domestic servants, of course, are always to a degree anachoristic. They must quit their own familiar spaces and relocate to alien domestic environments, ones to which they never quite belong – present yet not present. While domestic servants are scattered throughout Taylor's oeuvre, the chapter privileges the 1950s, a period of major social and cultural change that saw the weakening of class boundaries and a move away from the employment of household servants. Even as social realist fiction of the period begins to reflect this change, Taylor's novels maintain their full quotient of nannies and nursery maids, cooks and housekeepers, chauffeurs and gardeners, albeit no longer the shadowy presences of former literary times. Clearly, their constant presence in Taylor's fiction is a gift to those wishing to stress the 'old-fashionedness' of her work. So why then does Taylor persist in animating such seemingly outdated figures? To answer this question the chapter explores the ways Taylor inscribes the mid-twentieth-century literary servant upon her 1950s fictive spaces, and examines the uses to which this figure is put, a figure so plainly situated both in and out of time and place.

Taylor's first 1950s novel, *A Game of Hide and Seek* (1951), straddles the Second World War, which is itself strangely absent, beginning around 1930 and ending twenty years later. Here I take leave to stretch the definition of domestic servant to embrace a trio of sales assistants, since in the 1930s they are just a decade removed from being household servants. Indeed,

their former below-stairs world is reimagined in Taylor's novel as a staff tea-room. A fertile layer of comedy is provided by these women, veiling a darker tone that anticipates a precarious future for an ageing single woman. Additionally, the novel features a foreign maid and a cleaning woman who, from their anachoristic status within the middle-class space they inhabit, offer an outsider perspective on the condition of postwar England. *The Sleeping Beauty* (1953), Taylor's second 1950s novel, features a nursery-maid figure whose textual role is both to supply a standard of normality against which the peculiar key protagonists may be measured, and to provide an external centre of consciousness from which to observe the middle classes. Finally, in Taylor's only historical novel, *Angel* (1957), the figure of the lady's maid is given the task of narrating life in the grand house, thus shaping the early narrative, and simultaneously introducing moments of characteristically Taylorian eccentricity. It is, however, the entrance of the outlandish figure of the chauffeur who provides the text with most of its absurdity, together with a further commentary on class divisions.

It is my contention that Taylor's out-of-place and evermore out-of-time servant-figures are given a textual authority that belies their inferior status – inferior in the sense of being at once marginal characters and of lowly status. These working-class fictive servants are in an unparalleled position both to critique Taylor's customary Thames Valley world, and to provide a commentary on the social and political changes wrought in English society in the aftermath of war. As such they become servants *of* the text, as well as *in* the text. Moreover, Taylor uses such figures to celebrate the intimacy of

female friendship, while simultaneously pursuing her desire to expose the absurdities and peculiarities that lurk within the ordinary – ‘the strangeness in everyday people’. She was, of course, not alone in featuring domestic servants within her novels; it is a literary tradition as old as the novel form. My claim, however, is that her method of writing the servant offers something distinct and new, and to argue this I first locate the domestic servant within its socio-historical and literary contexts.

### **The servant in history and literature**

As Alison Light reflects in her fascinating study, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*, servants ‘are everywhere and nowhere in history’.<sup>1</sup> In the larger establishments of the Victorian upper-middle classes, the servant was little more than an ‘absent presence’, she observes.<sup>2</sup> According to Woolf, however, all was set to change. In characteristically ironic style, Woolf looks back from the vantage point of the 1920s to pluck a precise date from which to record a shift in ‘human relations’ in her famous essay of 1924, ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’:<sup>3</sup>

[I]n or about December 1910 human character changed. [...] The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing-room, now to borrow the *Daily Herald*, now to ask advice about a hat.

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants* (London: Penguin, 2008). p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> November 1910 saw the opening of Roger Fry’s important exhibition, ‘Manet and the Post-Impressionists’. Her date may have been a reference to the effect of this exhibition on the public.

[...] All human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children.<sup>4</sup>

That she chooses to exemplify a wider transformation in society with a reference to the domestic is entirely in concordance with Woolf's concern with private life and the everyday. By 1910, she asserts, the servant had moved from a position of subservient non-existence to a remarkably visible, more equal existence, on familiar terms with her employers. Such change, however, took somewhat longer to manifest itself within the English middle and upper classes. Nevertheless, in privileging the middle-class home as a locus for change, she foregrounds its importance to any negotiation in class relationships. Furthermore, by drawing attention to the unequal polarities of master–servant and husband–wife, Woolf is plainly referencing both class and gender in her assertion of a radical realignment within society – both servants' and women's lives have altered, she declares. Yet such a transformation is lacking in Woolf's encounters with her own servants. Her attitude was ambivalent, contradictory, self-deluding, and at times contemptuous, an attitude comprehensively examined by Light. As she concludes, 'Virginia's public sympathy with the lives of poor women was always at odds with private recoil.'<sup>5</sup>

The shift in the socio-cultural life of Britain that Woolf signals gained momentum in the 1920s. As women began to spurn the constrictions of domestic service for more congenial work in offices, shops and factories, the

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<sup>4</sup> Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *The Captain's Death Bed, and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950). pp. 91-92.

<sup>5</sup> Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*. p. 203. Nowhere is this aversion more apparent than in Woolf's description of a bedraggled beggar in *Mrs Dalloway*, likened to a 'rusty pump' whose mouth was 'a mere hole in the earth'. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*. pp. 90, 91.

'servant problem' loomed large in the lives of the servant-keeping classes.<sup>6</sup> According to Sara Blair, 'traditional and rigidly hierarchical codes of class and national identity, social distinction, and cultural value were being rapidly broken.'<sup>7</sup> An unwillingness to enter domestic service strengthened during the Second World War, culminating in a steep decline in the practice of employing residential servants.<sup>8</sup> By the early 1950s, notes Christopher Driver, 'middle class houses continued to be cleaned, at least in part, by persons other than their owners. But no longer did these persons live in, or work full time, as cooks and housemaids.'<sup>9</sup> Much time and energy was expended during the postwar years in attempting to solve the 'servant problem' and relieve the resultant drudgery of women's domestic lives – middle- and upper-class women, that is. As Judy Giles points out in her perceptive book on modernity and domesticity, the 'system [of servant-keeping] was so pervasive and taken for granted that, for many, it appeared part of the "natural order"'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The problem of getting and keeping servants began in earnest after the First World War and continued into the 1950s. See, for example, Judy Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb : Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg, 2004). Chapter 2, pp. 65-100.

<sup>7</sup> Sara Blair, 'Modernism and the Politics of Culture', in Michael H. Levenson, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). p. 164.

<sup>8</sup> In the 1931 census, 4.8% of private households in England and Wales had one or more servants, compared to 1.2% in the 1951 census. Christopher P. Driver, *The British at Table, 1940-1980* (London: Chatto & Windus : Hogarth Press, 1983). p. 14, quoted in Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s : Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. p. 115.

<sup>9</sup> Driver, *The British at Table, 1940-1980*. p. 14, quoted in Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s : Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism*. p. 115.

<sup>10</sup> Giles, *The Parlour and the Suburb : Domestic Identities, Class, Femininity and Modernity*. p. 68.

Giles discusses Roy Lewis' and Angus Maude's 1949 survey of the middle classes, which includes a defence of the practice of servant-keeping.<sup>11</sup> They assert quite without irony that life for the middle-class housewife was harder than for her working-class counterpart, citing the increased workload necessitated by maintaining larger houses and higher standards of living. While their survey does at least mention the often appalling lives of both servants and working-class housewives, it focuses on how best to preserve the quality of domestic life for the privileged classes, a life perceived to be under threat: 'if the [ruling classes] must cut themselves off from leisure activities [...] if good furniture, good silver and good pictures (all of which need careful maintenance) are to be banished for ever to museums; [...] then emigration to Eire or South Africa seems the only hope.'<sup>12</sup> The inequalities inherent in such a social system are manifest. Nevertheless, middle-class domestic life was transformed during the period, as the residential servant disappeared from all but upper-class homes (and, of course, Taylor's novels). At best, the middle classes managed to engage daily staff, as the working classes drifted from private to public employment, valuing improved wages and greater independence. No longer must the servant be the 'absent presence', the alien creature occupying the periphery of someone else's life. By the 1950s, Woolf's pronouncement finally becomes a reality: the proximity necessitated by smaller domestic spheres required the servant to be recognised if not as an equal, then at least as a unique and independent human being.

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<sup>11</sup> Roy Lewis and Angus Maude, *The English Middle Classes* (Bath: Cedric Chivers, repr. 1973).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p. 256.

Literary history follows a similar temporal trajectory with regard to the servant. Indeed, Light's claim might be rewritten: 'servants are everywhere and nowhere in literary history'. As George Orwell observes in his 1940 essay on the fiction of Dickens, when working people 'do find their way between the covers of a book, it is nearly always as objects of pity or as comic relief.'<sup>13</sup> Bruce Robbins reaches similar conclusions in his influential work, *The Servant's Hand*, which tracks the trope of the literary servant from its peak as the picaresque servant-narrator of the eighteenth century to the largely insignificant standing of the servant in the Victorian realist novel.<sup>14</sup> While they may add colour, texture and humour to the narrative, servants are frequently little more than plot devices. Chiefly, Robbins concludes, servants are employed to clarify or describe events for the reader, or act as messengers: 'accessories used to complicate or resolve the action.'<sup>15</sup> He does, however, concede a few notable exceptions, for example the well-developed voice of *Wuthering Heights*' Nelly Dean. Nonetheless, from his socialist perspective he expresses frustration that literary servants are so often reduced to mere 'voiceless tableaux'.<sup>16</sup>

Bakhtin identifies a further role for the literary servant: 'spying and eavesdropping on private life'.<sup>17</sup> In 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', written largely during the 1930s, he argues that the servant in the picaresque novel is peculiarly placed to observe unobserved the personal

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<sup>13</sup> George Orwell, "Charles Dickens," in *Decline of the English Murder : And Other Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965). p. 82.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce Robbins, *The Servant's Hand : English Fiction from Below* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p. x.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.112-113.

<sup>17</sup> Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." p. 124.

and private life of the ruling classes, the perpetual ‘third man’ in the room: ‘that distinctive, embodied point of view on the world of private life without which a literature treating private life could not manage.’<sup>18</sup> (Naturally, the ‘private life’ referred to is the life of masters not servants, who in literature are rarely blessed with private lives.) Yet while the servant-figure is well positioned to embody such a distinct perspective, to act as a form of servant-narrator, early twentieth-century fiction rarely entrusts to the servant such a task. There is, of course, a sense in which a novel’s extradiegetic narrator assumes Bakhtin’s servant role: the narrator is always ‘the third man’ in the narrative, empowered by the author to disclose to the reader the personal and private lives of her fictional characters, to become in effect the author’s servant-narrator. Indeed, Tracey Thorn notes Taylor’s ability to capture moments ‘when characters believe they are unobserved; as if she were eavesdropping on private conversations.’<sup>19</sup> Yet the narrator’s viewpoint is most often a middle-class one, for narrators frequently share the socio-cultural background of the author. What is distinctive about Taylor, however – and writers such as Patrick Hamilton, Elizabeth Bowen and Henry Green – is that she proffers this outsider view of the middle classes by assigning to her literary servant the role of direct or indirect intradiegetic narrator, thereby allowing the middle classes to be viewed through a lower-class lens. It is not until Woolf’s final novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), that she does something similar.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. pp.124-125.

<sup>19</sup> Tracey Thorn, "Every Angle, Every Light," *New Statesman* 27 August 2012. pp. 38-39.



Throughout the first half of the twentieth century the servant-figure takes its place in fiction, sometimes reflecting, but more often resisting, the substantial socio-cultural changes occurring in English domestic life. Woolf's literary servants are paradigmatic. Save for the more 'rounded' parlourmaid, Lucy, in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and the caretaker, Mrs McNab, in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), her servant-figures conform closely to Robbins' literary stereotype. Largely Forster's 'flat' characters, they are constructed either as elderly loyal dogsbodies, patronised by their superiors, or reduced to 'voiceless tableaux'.<sup>20</sup> In *Mrs Dalloway* servants are represented by disembodied sounds within the house: 'the swish of a mop; tapping; knocking; a loudness when the front door opened; a voice repeating a message in the basement; the chink of silver on a tray'.<sup>21</sup> Only the parlourmaid, Lucy is afforded a somewhat less stereotypical role, as she turns a subordinate's gaze on the lives of the privileged classes. In her scenes there is a blurring, at times almost a fusion, of her character with that of Clarissa; in many ways they are doubles, complicating the mistress–servant binary. Yet essentially Lucy remains a nineteenth-century literary trope, an anachoristic figure in black and white, on the periphery of others' lives.

To her next servant Woolf entrusts a more ambitious role: the doughty Mrs McNab in *To the Lighthouse* is empowered by the author to tell the war and its consequences. It is within the 'Time Passes' section that Woolf allegorises the horror and chaos of the First World War, compressing a decade of destruction into a few pages. Here we encounter Woolf's most

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<sup>20</sup> For an elucidation of Forster's 1927 terms 'flat' and 'round', see E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Penguin, 1990). pp. 73-81.

<sup>21</sup> Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*. p. 43.

interesting literary servant, the elderly, worn-out Mrs McNab who shuffles into the text, interrupting the poetic narrative flow as it pursues the 'little airs' into every crevice of the crumbling house. Abruptly the language changes: Mrs McNab 'lurched', 'rolled', 'leered', 'she was witless, she knew it'.<sup>22</sup> The deserted house and its contents are in near-terminal decline, a decline reversed only by the ministrations of Woolf's working-class figure. That Woolf entrusts this task to a shambling caricature of an elderly servant is at first puzzling, given her ambivalence towards the lower classes. But in fact Woolf's depiction reflects this ambivalence: she gives Mrs McNab power in the text ('there was a force working'), even as she withdraws it ('something not highly conscious; something that leered, something that lurched').<sup>23</sup> Ultimately Mrs McNab's construction as a primitive life form does little to challenge the stereotype of the incoherent working masses.

While Woolf's 1930s novels, *The Waves* (1931) and *The Years* (1937), add little to the literary servant conversation, a more central position is given to the working classes in her final novel, *Between the Acts*.<sup>24</sup> This is a novel preoccupied with the past, with the social and domestic history of England. Inhabiting a suspended moment in June 1939, at the very brink of war, it questions the contribution the past can make to the present, entrusting this task to the working-class villagers who perform the annual pageant. Straddling the old order and the new, the text captures the moment when

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<sup>22</sup> Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*. p. 194.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p. 207.

<sup>24</sup> According to Light, early drafts of *The Waves* gave lower-class figures a voice, but they failed to survive to publication – Woolf found she could not encompass them within the novel. See Light, *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*. pp. 202-203, and Virginia Woolf, *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*, J. W. Graham, ed. (London: Hogarth Press, 1976).

England's class-ridden society is poised for change, anxiously anticipating a fundamental and irreversible shift towards a more egalitarian society. The working classes represent simultaneously the old world and the new: within Pointz Hall the eternal mistress–servant hierarchy flourishes, but outside lower-class villagers are charged with the task of telling the history of England. And when they turn their mirrors on the ruling classes, inverting roles and complicating the boundary between audience and actors, the resulting fractured and fragmented images anticipate the overturning of established social structures. Had Woolf written after the war, her servant-figures may have encompassed this postwar shift in society. Her essay, 'The Leaning Tower' (1940), certainly suggests such a possibility.<sup>25</sup>

By 1940 a number of novelists were extending significant roles to the lower classes. Indeed, as early as 1926 Hamilton was anticipating in *Craven House* the approaching transformation in class relations.<sup>26</sup> John Lucas considers the novel to be one of the first, 'to direct the focus of its concern away from an exclusive concentration on middle-class characters and issues.'<sup>27</sup> Set in an English lodging-house, *Craven House*, straddles the period before and after the First World War. While ostensibly a comic domestic novel, it uses its comedic form to destabilise the unquestioning

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<sup>25</sup> 'The Leaning Tower', a paper written for the Workers' Educational Association, Brighton, May 1940, in Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays*, 4 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1966). Vol. 2. pp. 162-181. The essay argues that, until the twentieth century, writers accepted unquestioningly a servant class devoted to their needs. Woolf, however, anticipates a postwar generation of writers inhabiting a tower-less, classless society, resulting in a more interesting novel, populated by real working-class characters.

<sup>26</sup> Patrick Hamilton, *Craven House*, New rev. ed. (London: Constable, 1943).

<sup>27</sup> John Lucas, "From Realism to Radicalism: Sylvia Townsend Warner, Patrick Hamilton and Henry Green in the 1920s", in Lynne Hapgood and Nancy L. Paxton, eds., *Outside Modernism: In Pursuit of the English Novel, 1900-30* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000). p. 214. Sylvia Townsend Warner does something similar in her novel, *The True Heart*, published in 1929, a novel entirely focalized through a domestic servant.

acceptance of a class system in which servants know their place. Before the war Audrey, a compliant young housemaid, occupies the margins of both domestic space and narrative. The war, however, signals a change in social relations: reference is made to ‘the Servant Problem’, together with ‘an alarming bent in the Lower Orders towards Answering Back’.<sup>28</sup> That a postwar chapter is devoted wholly to Audrey is indicative of her pivotal role. Now in her twenties, she begins to challenge hegemonic class assumptions, transgressing the borders of her servant role. She is finally dismissed as a consequence of urging her employer to ‘keep your hair on’.<sup>29</sup> The narrative at first invites us to conclude that Craven House and middle-class English society generally are not ready for Woolf’s transformation in ‘human relations’. Yet Audrey’s departure precipitates a tonal shift: the novel darkens as the stable world of the house’s middle-class inhabitants begins to unravel; while they may be ill-prepared to accept a new order, it is clearly signalled.

At the heart of Bowen’s remarkable experimental short story, ‘Oh Madam’ (1940), is the hegemonic mistress–servant binary.<sup>30</sup> Set during the London blitz, it gives an extensive voice to a servant-figure; in fact, the servant’s voice *is* the narrative. The text inhabits the bombed-out remains of a grand house, and consists entirely of a ‘dialogue’ between the disembodied voice of a housemaid and her mistress. It is, however, more monologue than dialogue since madam is an absent presence in the text; her share of the

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<sup>28</sup> Hamilton, *Craven House*. p. 97.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* p.155.

<sup>30</sup> “Oh Madam”, in Elizabeth Bowen, *Look at All Those Roses : Short Stories* (London: J. Cape, 1951).

'conversation' is represented by ellipses, the text as fractured as the house. It is even possible madam is literally absent, and the discourse an interior monologue; Bowen's ambiguous text leaves such notions unresolved.<sup>31</sup> In a reversal of literary tradition it is madam who is the anachoristic, incorporeal silent presence, there and not there. Yet her silence speaks volumes: to both women the house has been home for several years, yet it is the maid who shows the greatest distress at its destruction. Ultimately madam betrays both house and servant, displaying no loyalty towards her home and, to the maid's dismay, plans to abandon it for the country. For, unlike the maid, madam has other homes. The servants, of course, have no choice but to remain unsafe amidst the threat of further bombs. To the maid, the house is a precious living thing, her constant companion. Naïvely believing herself and madam to be a united front, the maid comments: 'Hitler can't beat you and me, madam, can he?'<sup>32</sup> Yet there is no united front, no fellow feeling; the gulf between mistress and maid is manifest. This poignant, ironic story affords the literary servant substantial authority in the text, even as it highlights the powerlessness of a housemaid exposed to the inequalities of a class system little changed since the Victorian era.

Henry Green moves a step further in affording Forster's 'roundness' to the lower classes. In his multilayered and complex novel, *Loving* (1945),<sup>33</sup> he subverts the conventions of the Irish 'Big House' novel by foregrounding the below-stairs life of the servants. Unusually, it is the English tenantry

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<sup>31</sup> Thomas Davis poses madam's absence in Thomas S Davis, "Late Modernism: British Literature at Midcentury," *Literature Compass* 9, no. 4 (2012). pp. 331-332.

<sup>32</sup> Bowen, *Look at All Those Roses : Short Stories*. p. 180.

<sup>33</sup> Henry Green, *Loving ; Living ; Party Going*, One-volume ed. (London: Pan Books, 1978).

(appositely named, 'the Tennants') who form the shadowy figures hovering in the textual margins. The novel's fairy-tale framing hints at an enchanted, magical world, within which lives a rich array of servants. Set in an Ireland overshadowed by the Second World War, *Loving's* servants are, surprisingly, predominantly English cockneys – all of whom are deemed superior to their near-voiceless Irish counterparts. Green's talent for rendering the idiolect of working-class figures is exceptional, acquired, according to James Wood, from his habit of eavesdropping on buses and in public houses, a practice he shared with Taylor.<sup>34</sup> Rather than simply reproducing such demotic language, however, he renders it strange. Here the maid, Edith, proudly shares with fellow servants her shock and excitement at finding her mistress, Violet, in bed with a lover: "she sat up in bed with her fronts bobblin' at him like a pair of geese".<sup>35</sup>

While Violet and her mother, Mrs Tennant, can have no secrets from those below stairs, the reverse is far from true. In a text suffused with spying, lies and deception, the mistresses are maintained in complete ignorance. As with most of their class at this time, the Tennants' interest in their servants extends little beyond a preoccupation with keeping them: "I don't think I care what they do so long as they stay".<sup>36</sup> The servants, then, acquire substantial power within the narrative: the power of knowledge and indispensability. Furthermore, they have the authority afforded them by their creator to tell their own story in their own language, and to report across the class divide

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<sup>34</sup> James Wood, "A Plausible Magic: The Novels of Henry Green", in MacKay and Stonebridge, eds., *British Fiction after Modernism : The Novel at Mid-Century*. p. 53.

<sup>35</sup> Green, *Loving ; Living ; Party Going*. p. 121.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* p. 36.

on the world of their 'betters' through the prism of their lower-class perspective. The class divide, however, is still very firmly in place: despite its 1940s setting, there is no hint of Woolf's anticipated future.

Unsurprisingly, the challenges to the social patterns of British life that were 'afflicting' the middle classes at mid-century seeped into the 'middlebrow' fiction of the period. Mollie Panter-Downes' *One Fine Day* (1947) is an example.<sup>37</sup> While the family retains a daily help, the absence of servants is palpable, and consequently the house is subsiding into shabbiness. Maids have been seduced by factory life: they 'disappeared squealing into the big bright world where there were no bells to run your legs off, [...] where you could go to the flicks regular, and where you worked to the sound of dance music'.<sup>38</sup> Even as this passage presents the maids' perspective on the advantages of factory life, the word, 'squealing' interjected by the middle-class narrator betrays a note of disapproval. Nonetheless, towards the end of the novel the iniquities of a system that requires the subjugation of one class to another is highlighted by the male protagonist:

it suddenly struck him as preposterous how dependent he and his class had been on the anonymous caps and aprons who lived out of sight and worked the strings. All his life he had expected [...] to find the fires bright and the coffee smoking hot every morning. [...] And now the strings had been dropped, they all lay helpless as abandoned marionettes with nobody to twitch them.<sup>39</sup>

Anonymous caps and aprons have no place in Taylor's world, however. During the war she lived briefly in a once-grand nineteenth-century house in

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<sup>37</sup> Mollie Panter-Downes, *One Fine Day* (London: Virago Press Ltd, 1985).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* p. 174.

Scarborough, the inspiration for the house in *At Mrs Lippincote's*. Shocked by the still-visible signs of the iniquitous Victorian mistress–servant hegemony, Taylor wrote to Russell: ‘It is incredible that women could ask so much of their fellow-creatures – the cavernous gas-stove, the sink, in its black corner, the high-up shelves, the uneven stone floors. Ah, it’s unbelievable.’<sup>40</sup> Indeed, the charwoman at the big house in *Palladian* may echo something of Taylor’s own thoughts, albeit in crudely comic fashion: “Half the world scrubbing on their knees, the other half sitting on its arse.” (PAL, 69) This, of course, returns us to Angel’s tirade in the opening passage of this chapter.

Yet despite her socialist views, Taylor always had some form of domestic help, most significantly her daily housekeeper, Mrs Howard, who joined her in the early 1950s and stayed beyond Taylor’s death in 1975.<sup>41</sup> It was a close and mutually supportive relationship: because Taylor could relinquish to Mrs Howard many of her domestic responsibilities, she found the freedom and space in which to write. Such freedom was fragile, however. At one point Mrs Howard considered leaving, and Taylor was distraught. As a fellow writer, Robert Liddell could empathise when she reported a conversation she had had with Mrs Howard:

“You realize you’re ruining my Christmas,” I said to her. I might even say “I hope you’re satisfied now” – that bitterly unjust phrase ... It is kind of you to be so understanding about Mrs Howard’s

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<sup>40</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell, 18 July 1943, Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 113.

<sup>41</sup> See *Ibid.* p. 328-329. According to Joanna Kingham, Mrs Howard ‘adored’ Taylor and became one of her closest friends. Indeed, it was she who nursed Taylor in her final months. Taylor would never have countenanced the word ‘servant’, particularly in relation to her own housekeeper. Telephone conversation with Joanna Kingham, 26 January 2010.



going – only another writer could be. “You’ll have to buckle to,” other people say. They relate experiences of “being without anyone” for months at a time – as if my position is like theirs, with only housework to bother me.<sup>42</sup>

Taylor was clearly not above emotional blackmail in her attempts to retain her housekeeper, such was her importance both personally and professionally. In fact, together with Taylor’s butcher and Elizabeth Bowen, Mrs Howard ‘could do no wrong’.<sup>43</sup>

In my examination of Taylor’s 1950s novels, I demonstrate that Woolf’s assertions of a more equal society are manifested in Taylor’s fictive landscape, as she shifts her literary servants from the shadows into the narrative proper. Yet as I have shown, by this period the domestic servant was in reality becoming a thing of the past. In an attempt to understand why Taylor persists in creating such outmoded figures, I examine the uses to which her various models of the servant-figure are put, figures so plainly situated in and out of time and place. I begin with those in Taylor’s bleak 1951 novel, *A Game of Hide and Seek*, which in its themes of loneliness and forbidden love pays explicit homage to both *Persuasion* and *Brief Encounter*, with more than a touch of *Madame Bovary*.

### ***A Game of Hide and Seek***

The novel opens around 1930, when the protagonist, Harriet, is a young woman of eighteen. A shy, innocent girl tormented by unrequited love, she

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<sup>42</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 102.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p. 102.

obtains work in a 'gown shop' amongst some of Taylor's most fully-developed, female working-class characters – the shop girls. Just a decade or two earlier these women would have been forced into the marginal world of domestic service, but can now choose the greater autonomy and freedom afforded by shop work. Having escaped the private world of domestic service, they emerge into the public world of the retail trade, still servants to their middle-class 'clients', but confined no longer to the periphery. Indeed, Taylor places the women at the heart of a chapter they dominate, one which haunts the second part of the novel. While they are observed from a middle-class perspective – both the narrator's and the heroine's – it is nonetheless a sympathetic and unpatronising viewpoint. Their pasts may be vague and their futures uncertain, but their presence, their voice in the text, is strong.

The 'below-stairs' world of a previous age is metamorphosed into the staff tea-room above the dress shop, yet in a sense it is still a 'below-stairs' world, forming a separate female domestic space that corresponds to the Victorian basement kitchen. If the function of servants is to maintain domestic order, these women sabotage that function, thereby distancing themselves from their servant past, expressing their autonomy within the workplace, their freedom from servitude. The chapter's opening sentence signals this rebellion: 'The disorder in the room was appalling' (GHS, 57). While the three 'sales ladies' use the tea-room as an extension of their own homes – cooking meals, washing, ironing, dressmaking, manicuring their nails – they continually abuse it, since the space belongs to their employer. The narrator savours the picture of the repellent tea table: 'They all sat round, breathing

into their tea, elbows on the table, before them a litter of buns in bags, butter in greasy papers, cigarette-stubs in saucers, Miss Lazenby's setting-lotion and comb.' (GHS, 57)

Both gender and class wars are waged, with the women clearly in the ascendancy. Even as the nameless male manager is technically in charge, in practice the women wield the power, united in their antipathy towards their work, their customers, and the longsuffering manager, rebelling by spending inordinate quantities of time in the tea-room attending to their own concerns. That Taylor enjoyed creating the anarchic tea-room lives of the shop girls is evident:

Their hours were long, so they spared themselves any hard work, filched what time they could; went up to elevenses at ten, were often missing while they cut out from paper-patterns, set their hair, washed stockings, drank tea. Nothing was done in their own time that could be done in the firm's. They were underpaid, so they took what they could; not money in actual coins, but telephone-calls, stamps, boxes of matches, soap. They borrowed clothes from stock; later when these were marked down as soiled, they bought them at the staff-price (GHS, 61).

Far from sounding a note of disapprobation, the narratorial stance seems to celebrate the many and diverse ways the women find to maximise their opportunities at their firm's expense. Only taking 'money in actual coins' would be classed as stealing, and thus attract censure. As Niamh Baker observes, it 'is a working-class strategy, a defence against exploitation. It is also a female strategy against male power'.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Baker, *Happily Ever After? : Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain, 1945-1960*. p. 145.

Taylor imagines for each of her women a distinct personality, positioning them within the gown-shop hierarchy in a way that echoes a tightly-knit servant community; and in so doing delineates three versions of the unmarried woman. The senior member of staff, Miss Brimpton, is the oldest of the three. While she jokingly describes herself as 'fat and forty', she plainly – and in all likelihood, erroneously – expects to be disbelieved. We are told she is a dreadful snob 'of the most usual kind' (GHS, 58), a telling phrase that suggests an exaggerated respect for those she considers her superiors, and contempt for those she does not. Indeed she 'wore pastel shades like Queen Mary', and once caught a glimpse of the little princesses: "They have only to be seen to be loved" (GHS, 59). Miss Lazenby's class-conscious response is, however: "How are they different from any other bloody kids?" (GHS, 59) She swears easily, drinks a lot, and spends large amounts of time and money dedicated to the improvement of her appearance. The third member is the pitifully compliant Miss Lovelace, whose name embodies the soft undemanding love she offers her men friends. Notably, the women have no given names, their single status emphasised repeatedly by the term 'Miss'.

Into this female domain steps the young, heart-broken, middle-class Harriet. A lifelong outsider, Harriet receives from the community of working-class sales ladies her first experience of belonging, just as she provides for the reader a fresh perspective on the class below. What Harriet observes are three cautionary tales of the unmarried state, as the women impart conflicting advice to their protégé on the art of survival with or without a man. Miss

Brimpton's experiences with men have left her sour. She has reached the stage where she advocates resisting all such relationships, for '[w]ere not men [...] all ungenerous or tyrannical or both, peevish, bestial?' And to cement her argument, she cites, without irony, their 'hairy legs'. (GHS, 61) The shrewd Miss Lazenby, on the other hand, advises using men to a woman's advantage: dovetailing one affair with another, she emerges from each with expensive gifts, although never a husband. We are told that she 'was rather free and easy with men, but the men were not always themselves in that happy position.' (GHS, 59) Miss Lovelace's men are similarly positioned. She is surely destined for endless disappointment, if not disaster, presenting Harriet with an image of a woman whom men use up before discarding, a tragic figure: her 'success with married men had perhaps deprived her of what she most wanted – a home and children.' (GHS, 60) Longingly, she observes the married state from the tea-room window, as if imprisoned there: "If only I could be one of those women down there shopping. Even a poor one with a great fish-basket and someone's supper to buy cheap. Someone to haggle for." (GHS, 99). The last affecting phrase concisely encapsulates her great need: 'someone to haggle for'.

The women's many beauty treatments undertaken in the tea-room serve to lighten the tone, even as they harbour a more serious intent. 'One day they all had ice from the fishmongers tied under their chins; the next day, clay was drying stiffly on their faces. They sat round the table and rolled their eyes at one another, but could not speak or smile.' (GHS, 62) In a particularly comic scene, they decide to remove facial hair with strips of hot wax, with

predictably excruciating results. Indeed, there is no limit to the intimacy and strangeness of the tasks performed in the tea-room.<sup>45</sup> While Miss Brimpton's motives for participation are uncertain since she has forsworn men, Miss Lazenby's and Miss Lovelace's survival clearly depends on their ongoing ability to attract men, a task that will become increasingly difficult with age and diminishing looks. While the descriptions of the women engaging in bizarre practices bring to the text examples of Taylor's customary humour, they simultaneously underline the characters' dissatisfaction with themselves and their lives, and their desire for transformation.

What Taylor exposes between the textual interstices is the despair, the lack of self-worth, the ultimate isolation experienced by these single women. That behind their masks, they 'could not speak or smile' suggests an essential inability to form close relationships. Without a past and with at best a precarious future, the three 'Misses', when away from the camaraderie of the tea-room, live separate and lonely lives. In the first two pages of the chapter variations of the word 'wonder' occur repeatedly: "I only wondered", "I was only wondering", 'She wondered', 'The others did wonder about her' (GHS, 57-58) Used in the sense of being curious, of speculating, of wanting to know about each other, these phrases serve to emphasise the fundamental isolation of each character. But the anomalous sentence 'They were all the time wondering about one another.' (GHS, 58) suggests something uncomfortable, even sinister, and does not quite fit the image of the tea-room as a place of support and friendly banter.

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<sup>45</sup> The notion that women's friendship is enhanced by the sharing of intimate beauty rituals continues into Taylor's next 1950s novel, *The Sleeping Beauty*, but in this case the women are middle-aged and middle-class.

That Harriet is different from the sales ladies is plain, and the women relish initiating her into their world. Their attitude to her virginity is a perfect example of Taylor's eccentricity. As Miss Brimpton notes, it 'was a possession, not a state': 'It seemed a privilege to have it under the same roof. They were always kindly enquiring after it, as if it were a sick relative.' (GHS, 61) Personifying virginity as 'a sick relative' seems at first incongruous: a sick relative, after all, requires looking after, constant attention, even cosseting. But the sales ladies have long since lost this prized possession, perhaps carelessly, and now want to see it continuing to exist healthily in another. The orphan, Harriet, is the neophyte at the temple that is the tea-room. Fascinated by their lifestyles and rituals, she is drawn to these mother-figures, anxious to flee her sheltered, friendless life. We see mutual respect and friendship flow through a permeable class boundary as she blossoms under their tutelage. Harriet's status amongst the women is further raised when she reveals her boyfriend, Charles, to be an educated professional man who, almost unbelievably in their eyes, offers marriage. Here then is a key textual function of these almost servant-figures: to underscore, in tragicomic style, the essential difference between the two classes of women. They must work to survive, while Harriet works to relieve boredom and solitude; she can escape into marriage, they never can. Even as the text engages and entertains the reader with its earthy depiction of the bold shop girls, the thread of their future desolation is weaving itself into the fabric of the novel.

When Harriet's mother dies, it is these women, rather than her dull future husband, to whom she turns for a form of maternal comfort: 'As much as she wished anything, she wished to be at work, to have her daily life in the shop with the other girls' (GHS, 100). Twenty years later, reminiscing with her lover, Vesey, she explains the bond between the women: "I think we loved one another, or were used to one another. One becomes very close to people one works with" (GHS, 213). But while a measure of equality across the class divide is shown as viable, its existence is precarious: once established in her middle-class home, the illusion of equality evaporates. Inviting the women to a disastrous tea party, she finds them "stiff and cautious and polite. They admired everything exhaustively. It was so uncasual." (GHS, 213) The juxtaposition of immaculate drawing-room and squalid tea-room reflects the disparity between their lives, the ultimately unbridgeable chasm.

After this encounter the sales girls return to the wings, reappearing briefly after a space of several years, as Harriet recounts their destinies. Miss Lazenby now works in a shop in London where "she meets a much nastier type of man". Her prospects are increasingly uncertain: "she's not young any more ... I wonder what can happen." (GHS, 212) Sadly, however, there is no uncertainty about Miss Lovelace. Unlike Miss Lazenby, her affairs did not dovetail. With desolate intervals between lovers, she became a fragile figure. Eventually, "she simply lay down on the floor with her head on a cushion right inside the gas-oven..." (GHS, 213) And while Miss Brimpton's future is not revealed, the signs are inauspicious. Taylor does not flinch from



portraying the intrinsic vulnerability of the lives of these working-class women as they age outside the protection of marriage.

The Second World War is largely absent from *A Game of Hide and Seek*. Structurally the novel omits almost twenty years, locating them in the lacuna between the 1930 of Part 1 and the 1950 of Part 2. Yet the effects of war on the socio-economic and domestic lives of the English middle classes suffuse the text, articulated by the external consciousness of a literary servant. The task of explaining war's non-appearance and critiquing its aftermath is incongruously entrusted to the anachoristic figure of the Dutch maid, Elke.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, she is doubly anachoristic: out of place in the domestic space of Harriet's home, and in the country. Though Elke makes the briefest of appearances, occupying just a few pages, as servant-narrator she gains authority and a distinct voice as the teller of war's legacy – a servant of and in the text. For like Taylor, she is a writer, but in this case she authors a version of 'fact'.

As noted above, Robbins cites Nelly Dean as resisting the prevailing stereotype: more than simply a literary plot device, Nelly has a pivotal role in the narrative, both servant-narrator and minor but significant character. Though outside the circle of central characters, she is trusted by some, confessed to by others, and at times seemingly sympathetic. Yet as Gideon Shunami observes, Nelly 'behaves out of motives which are personal and at

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<sup>46</sup> In her representation of this character, Taylor may be referencing *To the Lighthouse* and its Swiss maid, Marie, who shares with Elke the plight of homesick foreigner marooned amongst the English middle classes. It is perhaps more than coincidence that in each case the servant-figure is set against her open bedroom window, symbolising a desire to escape.

times even selfish.<sup>47</sup> In justifying her actions to her fellow narrator, Lockwood, Nelly is a knowingly unreliable narrator.<sup>48</sup> Taylor's servant-narrator, Elke, is not so much unreliable as naïvely uncomprehending. She acts as a perplexed narrator of 1950s English life via the thoughts and impressions recorded in letters to her parents, texts within the text. Because her gaze is that of a bemused outsider – a stranger viewing the inexplicable – it foregrounds the inconsistencies underpinning postwar England, reflecting a theme of contradiction and reversal embedded in the narrative itself:

England bewildered and bored her. [...] She could not accustom herself to all the absurd contrasts – the continual bathing, and the filthy shops; women doing men's jobs, men pushing prams. The old-fashioned motor-cars made her laugh; the trains belching smoke appalled her. Conversation was especially puzzling. She thought the English were as taken up with the weather as they sounded; not knowing that it was a refuge. All experiences in the war were apparently dully unmentionable. People who told stories about air-raids were thought bores.

Sunday was a strange day. They wore, not their best, but rather shabbier clothes than on other days. [...] Charles would first clean his car and then go out for a drink. [...] Harriet washed the hair-brushes and her powder-puffs. [...] No one went to Church but her. (GHS, 153)

In Taylor's concise prose, the passage encapsulates many of the changes observable in the drab world of postwar Britain: shops are dirty, clothes are worn out, technology is outdated. While most women had (often reluctantly) relinquished their war work to men, this was not universal: despite considerable governmental and social pressure to take up their 'rightful place' in the home, women can still be seen 'doing men's jobs'. And in a

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<sup>47</sup> Gideon Shunami, "The Unreliable Narrator in *Wuthering Heights*," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 27, no. 4 (March 1973). p. 453.

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion on 'the unreliable narrator', see Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 1983). pp. 158-159 and 300-308.

reversal of roles, men are sharing women's work. Where before the war and 'the servant problem', the middle classes employed domestic staff, the image of Charles (as chauffeur) and Harriet (as lady's maid) in a state of semi-servitude heralds the permanent social shift war has precipitated. Elke's servant-narrator, however, misunderstands the apparent obsession with the weather, 'not knowing that it was a refuge', a universally safe and quintessentially English topic to fill the conversational gaps left by the unspeakable atrocities of war, still too raw and omnipresent to be freely discussed. Taylor too takes refuge from war-talk in this novel, her first since *A Wreath of Roses* where she attempts to write war out of her system.

That life has lost its radiance is plain, yet as some form of compensation we see, inflected by the servant-narrator's disapproval, a world more relaxed, more flexible than pre-war. The formal rituals of 'Sunday best' and church attendance are less prevalent, replaced in this more secular environment by casual clothes, informal visiting, drinks in the pub – faith shaken by the dreadful sights witnessed perhaps. Class barriers too are breaking down, although not entirely – and, it would seem, not in Holland. As Elke reports, Harriet 'had asked another Nederlander to tea, but she had turned out to be a country girl with bad accent. [...] Apparently the English think that to have the same language is enough. They would scarcely themselves wish to mix with all classes' (GHS, 154). Far from providing a lower-class view of the middle classes, Elke feels equal if not superior to the bizarre English people she observes. She is especially baffled by the incongruity of Harriet's intimate friendship with her cleaner, Mrs Curzon, with whom she drinks tea,

and even an occasional gin. While we are told that Elke's stay in England 'would not turn out to be a valuable experience' (GHS, 155), as servant of the text, her experience as Taylor's author-apprentice proves very valuable, entrusted as she is with the key task of accounting for war's absence and revealing its aftermath.

In contrast to Elke, Mrs Curzon is intensely loyal to Harriet, who though still bearing the scars of her unhappy youth, is now installed as middle-class wife and mother in an elegant Regency home. Mrs Curzon owes little to Robbins' stereotypical faithful retainer. Rather, she is an affectionately-drawn character with a life before and beyond her role as servant, and an authoritative position within the text. Despite entering the narrative via the 'back door', she moves swiftly centre-stage, offering a further example of changing times. Condescendingly described as 'charwoman' by the narrator, 'servant' by the snobbish mother-in-law, and 'the rough woman who came to do the scrubbing' by Elke (GHS, 154), Mrs Curzon prefers the epithet 'lady cleaner', evidence of her strong sense of self-worth: "Well, there's one thing I am not and never have been, that's a charwoman" (GHS, 219). Though still an anachoristic working-class figure at once in and out of place in a middle-class domestic space, Mrs Curzon is neither marginalised in the text, nor in the novel's social hierarchy.

Providing Harriet with a further mother-figure, Mrs Curzon represents a continuation of the maternal intimacy first encountered within the gown shop. While their relationship theoretically conforms to the mistress-servant binary,

the unequal duality this implies is promptly undermined by their affectionate conversations. Ostensibly discussing Elke, Harriet and Mrs Curzon are here engaged in reinforcing their friendship:

“Madam, dear, what is it?” Mrs Curzon, full of concern, put her arm across Harriet’s shoulders. “Don’t let her haggle you. I’ve worked for you thirteen years and please God I’ll still be here when you say Curzy dear you’re in your bloody dotage so here’s half-a-crown for old lang’s syne. You know I’d do anything for you, no question of it.”

“I know. You’ve been my dear friend.”

“*Been? Am*, you mean, dear. I *am*. It would take more than a pack of foreigners to part us two.” (GHS, 142-143)

Although Harriet is addressed as ‘madam’, any hint of subservience is instantly swept aside by the ‘dear’ that follows. She is variously ‘Madam, dearie’ or ‘Madam, ducky’ or ‘lovie’. Harriet’s husband, on the other hand, is notably ‘the master’ in his only mention. In her turn, Mrs Curzon is often referred to as ‘Curzy’ or ‘Curzy, dear’, ironically, a near homophone of ‘curtsy’. This mirroring of endearments reflects the more equal nature of the relationship between the two characters. Given their intimacy, it is at first sight surprising that Harriet fails to share with Mrs Curzon the secret of her illicit affair with Vesey. Yet perhaps not so surprising if Harriet sees Mrs Curzon as a surrogate mother – mothers are rarely privy to their daughters’ secrets.

Mrs Curzon’s speech patterns are richly conceived by Taylor, undoubtedly benefiting from her fieldwork in public houses. While injecting an element of humour, in sharp contrast to the discontent that saturates the house, the cleaner’s demotic language has an authenticity that resists any descent into

caricature. In response to Harriet's "How are you this morning, Mrs Curzon?", she replies:

"Chronic, dear, thanks. Three o'clock this morning, I thought I'd die, and I wished I would. You know how it is, with the bed swinging one way and your stomach the other. A couple of hours earlier I hadn't a care in the world. Laugh! [...] terrible hiccups ... you'd have enjoyed it, madam ..." (GHS, 137).

Harriet, who had also been to a party the previous evening, identifies with Mrs Curzon's morning-after feeling – a further sharing. Later, discussing Elke's many shortcomings, Mrs Curzon refuses to countenance criticism of the English:

"Telling me we're all dirty. 'Dirty!' I said, 'and what about that duster you're using on madam's white paint' – as black as Newgate's knocker without a word of a lie ... and wiping over the gas-stove with the floor-cloth. She knew she'd gone a step too far. 'Oh, well,' she says, 'perhaps the French are worse.' 'That lot!' I said. 'We don't care to be mentioned in the same breath.'" (GHS, 143)

Unusually amongst fictive servants, Mrs Curzon is given a past and a private life beyond her role as cleaner. She has a Labour-voting husband and a daughter who aspires to join the middle-classes, exemplified by the 'cocktail-parties' she hosts in her London home: "I wish you'd seen it – port, brandy, lovely ham-sandwiches" (GHS, 223). Indeed, in a novel of largely defective relationships between the sexes, Mrs Curzon's task is to embody an alternative, more successful lifestyle. The glimpses we receive of her working-class marriage suggest a thriving liaison. Moreover, this servant-figure locates the narrative within the wider socio-political events of the time,

offering a mature, working-class commentary on 1950s England, to counter Elke's immature foreigner's view. Set during Attlee's 1945-1951 Labour government, one committed to social reform and a redistribution of wealth, the text via its servant-figure provides observations on improving times. In her own idiom Mrs Curzon critiques the new welfare state, an analysis shared perhaps by the Labour-voting Taylor. Despite being "not Labour myself", Mrs Curzon gives praise where it is due: "I like to speak fairly and, no disrespect, things do begin to brighten up. Grumble, grumble, they do on the bus, mornings. [...] I said the other morning 'Did the other lot give you so much as a bottle of cough-cure, let alone a set of teeth and such-like?'" (GHS, 220-221) In Taylor's hands the political becomes deeply personal – and indeed comic – as the massive changes instigated by the government are epitomised by the introduction of free dentures.

In *A Game of Hide and Seek* Taylor uses the trope of the literary servant in a number of ways that run counter to its inferior textual status. As servants of and in the text, Taylor's anachoristic figures are given the important task of proffering an outsider's viewpoint on the changes wrought in English postwar society. I use 'outsider' here in the sense of stemming from beyond Taylor's habitual middle-class world. In so doing the text is located within its time historically, politically and socially, even as the servant-figure itself is increasingly out of time. Furthermore, in a text suffused with pathos, one that mercilessly confronts loneliness, Taylor's servant-figures are employed to celebrate the emotional strength to be gained from warm, intimate friendships between women, regardless of class, something plainly absent

between the male characters. And it is within these female friendships that Taylor puts her scalpel to good use in examining the many absurdities that contribute to the 'everydayness' of life.

As is almost universal in Taylor's oeuvre, marriage rarely flourishes. An exception is that between the Curzons, which serves as a contrast to the troubled middle-class examples. Yet while marriage is seldom seen to be a recipe for happiness, no viable alternative is offered: the single life is plainly precarious, especially if female and working class. It can be no accident that, unlike the middle-class characters, the key servant-figures are distinguished by their single status, further emphasising marriage's importance to women. While there seems little to choose between the two states on view, the text argues that marriage may be preferable if poor and female.<sup>49</sup>

### ***The Sleeping Beauty***

Such a conclusion can equally be drawn from Taylor's portrayal of a servant-figure in her unsettling 1953 novel, *The Sleeping Beauty*. While the fairytale framing is proclaimed in the title, this modern retelling is far darker and more ambiguous than the traditional tale. Littered with opposites and doublings, the text's depictions of 'good' and 'evil' are equivocal, blurring the Manichean struggle; indeed, morality is a relativist notion in the novel. In place of the classic 'once-upon-a-time' opening, the reader is presented with funeral

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<sup>49</sup> This somewhat pessimistic conclusion anticipates Chapter 4 in which I examine the way Taylor's 1960s fictive women speak to Simone de Beauvoir's seminal text of 1949, *The Second Sex*.



wreaths, symbols of death – and these linked to the prospective ‘prince’, Vinny. The ‘happily-ever-after’ ending is already unlikely. Set in the suggestively-named town of Seething, the text mines its characters’ psyches to expose their simmering emotions. As Rebecca Abrams observes, ‘it is [Taylor’s] unflinching dissection of what goes on beneath the surface of people’s lives that makes the worlds of her novels so magnetising.’<sup>50</sup>

By the early 1950s, the positions of nursery-maid and nanny were in increasingly short supply in both life and literature, and yet *The Sleeping Beauty* features both. Betty is nursery-maid to the children of a wealthy London couple passing the summer at Rose’s guest house in the seaside town of Seething. While a minor character in the narrative, this out-of-place and increasingly out-of-time figure is given two substantial roles in the text. First, in its very ordinariness, the romance budding across the class divide between Betty and another minor character, Laurence, sets into sharp relief the utter strangeness of the relationship between the two ‘fairytale’ protagonists, Vinny and Emily. Second, as an ambitious young working-class woman, the aspiring Betty beams a lower-class light on the customs and behaviour of the novel’s middle-class inhabitants, prompting an examination of class and snobbery in 1950s England. Thus even as she is out of time in her textual role as nursery-maid, Betty is ‘in time’ in the functions she performs in the text.

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<sup>50</sup> Abrams, "A Master of Miniaturism." 73-75.

The 'royal' hero and heroine make an unlikely pairing. Vinny is a middle-aged, effete romantic who has always shunned emotional and sexual attachment: he found it impossible 'to cross the gap from wooing to lovemaking [...] At the beginning of each relationship, he struck all the right notes; but sophistication, lightness, gallantry, could not carry him through anything so dire as passion.' The passage continues humorously: 'pitch darkness, for instance was, he felt, essential.' (TSB, 69) Assuming the improbable role of prince, Vinny is the perfect romantic lead for Taylor's strange subversion of the traditional fairy story – a putative lover who considers passion to be 'dire'. Despite his clandestine, celibate marriage of many years' standing, he rescues his sleeping beauty, Emily, from her psychological confinement within the grim clutches of her sister, Rose, an aptly-named antagonist given its association with thorns. Indeed, in an overt allusion to the fairytale, Rose's attachment to Emily is described as 'enclosing her like a thicket of briars.' (TSB, 47) First, however, he must awaken the submissive Emily from the living death she has endured since an accident necessitated reconstructive surgery on her face, transforming it into an immobile yet uncannily beautiful mask. As Clare Hanson suggests, if 'the surgeon has created Emily's appearance, Vinny takes over the (re)construction of her personality'.<sup>51</sup> At one point Emily declares to Vinny: "Oh, I am nothing without you [...] I feel as if you had invented me. I watch you inventing me, week after week." (TSB, 187) This rather sinister speech drags overtones of *Frankenstein* into The Sleeping Beauty fable.

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<sup>51</sup> Hanson, *Hysterical Fictions : The "Woman's Novel" in the Twentieth Century*. p. 90.

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir argues that a young girl:

learns that to be happy she must be loved; to be loved she must await love's coming. Woman is The Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Snow White, she who receives and submits. In song and story, the young man is seen departing adventurously in search of woman; he slays the dragon, he battles giants; she is locked in a tower, a palace, a garden, a cave [...] she waits.<sup>52</sup>

Vinny, of course, is no dragon-slayer. In many ways Taylor's text was ahead of its time, articulating a more nuanced reworking of the classic tale. Donald Haase argues that 'one of the achievements of feminist fairy-tale scholarship has been to reveal how women have, for over three hundred years, quite intentionally used the fairytale to engage questions of gender and to create tales spoken or written differently from those told or penned by men.'<sup>53</sup> Feminist discourse since *The Second Sex* has continued to interrogate fairy stories for what they reveal about gender stereotyping, sexual taboos and oppressive power imbalances, and into the 1970s de Beauvoir's version of female passivity prevailed. Feminist critics held that fairytales like *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* had 'heroines who were passive, apparently dead or sleepwalking, dependent on the arrival of the prince for any animation and for entry into a real life – though a real life that never was given any contours after the obligatory royal wedding', according to Elizabeth Wanning Harris.<sup>54</sup> In Taylor's hands, a happy dénouement is far from

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<sup>52</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M.Parshley, Everyman Library (London: David Campbell Publishers Ltd, 1993). p. 318.

<sup>53</sup> Donald Haase, ed. *Fairy Tales and Feminism : New Approaches*, Series in Fairy-Tale Studies (Detroit: Wayne State University Press,2004). pp. viii-ix.

<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Wanning Harris, "The Mirror Broken: Autobiography and Fairy Tales", in *Ibid.* p. 99.

certain: having married the heroine, Vinny may face incarceration for bigamy, an ironic twist to the traditional fairytale.

In his essay, 'Elizabeth Taylor and the Coronation', Neil Reeve examines the extent to which *The Sleeping Beauty* could be considered Taylor's 'reconstruction novel', which in common with other novels of the period is 'touched by a mood of emergence or re-emergence'.<sup>55</sup> He describes *The Sleeping Beauty* as a novel of awakenings, though ones that 'are problematic, full of ambiguity, of the uncertain play of continuity and change that restoring or reconstructing entails'.<sup>56</sup> In the early 1950s, these 'awakenings' reflect the emerging postwar transformations in society, which include the position of the domestic servant. In *The Sleeping Beauty* Taylor employs the servant-figure to examine the uncertain and troubled awakenings between the classes and sexes – for Emily's is not the only female awakening. Mirroring the strange love story between the main protagonists is one Taylor animates in the textual shadows: the more plausible and realistic romance developing between two minor figures, the servant Betty<sup>57</sup> and the middle-class Laurence. Where Emily ostensibly conforms to the stereotype of the fairytale princess passively awaiting rescue, her alter ego, Betty, a more modern construction, is frustrated by her inability to take control of her life.

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<sup>55</sup> N.H. Reeve, "Elizabeth Taylor and the Coronation," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2009). p. 265.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* p. 272.

<sup>57</sup> Betty, short for Elizabeth, is an appropriate name for a 'princess' in the early 1950s. The queen was still Princess Elizabeth when Taylor began the novel in 1951.

That Betty lacks agency is underlined by her response to a question over the length of her stay in *Seething*: “I don’t know. They don’t tell you.” (TSB, 96) Living her lonely life, she is entirely at the mercy of her employers. Yet, though powerless in her role as nursery-maid, Betty is given textual authority as the eponymous heroine’s double. She is, in fact, one of Taylor’s most richly-drawn and well-rounded literary servants. Written with sympathy and without condescension, Betty is provided with an interior life, a developed voice, and an existence beyond her servant role. In common with her fellow working-class characters in the narrative, she is afforded a substantial presence, echoing Green’s *Loving*: Betty’s lively, naïve personality resonates with *Loving*’s servant-protagonist, Edith, and like Edith, Betty has a key part to play.

The doubling effect created by the parallel love stories in *The Sleeping Beauty*, a device redolent of a Shakespearean comedy, is underscored by the doubling of the two ‘sleeping beauties’.<sup>58</sup> Both Emily and Betty are described as fine-looking, but while one is entombed within an artificially reconstructed beauty, the other is naturally pretty. Both wear masks, but again, while Emily’s is the mask-like result of her facial surgery, Betty’s is created by cosmetics, unnecessarily applied to increase her self-confidence: ‘Under her eyes, her skin was a foxglove colour with golden freckles. The rest of her face was thickly powdered.’ (TSB, 89) As the novel opens, the ‘princesses’, one sexually experienced, the other virginal, are suspended in a kind of limbo. Where Emily is imprisoned emotionally, maintained in that

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<sup>58</sup> For example, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

state by her sister, Rose (plainly, the wicked-fairy figure), Betty is imprisoned by poverty and class. According to fairytale tradition, unless rescued by love and marriage – still the most common ‘escape’ for women in the 1950s – a grim destiny awaits; for Betty such a destiny is embodied in ‘Nannie’, and for Emily, in Mrs Siddons.

Nannie, Betty’s fellow employee, is an unemotional professional who ‘made no friends and needed none, but bent all her energies upon her charges, as no mother does upon her children.’ (TSB, 198) If unmarried, Betty would remain in her anachoristic state, reduced to joining the grim army of ageing nannies ‘in virginal old-age, forced to busy themselves in their declining days with other people’s children in other people’s houses.’ (TSB, 199) The repetition of ‘other’ here serves to emphasise their outsider status. As is customary in fairytales, the mirror is a constant trope in the novel. At one point, Betty sees herself in a fun-fair’s distorting mirror, creating a pitiless image of her future self: ‘her apron hideously widened, her legs shortened’ (TSB, 220). Emily too is offered a warped vision of her future if not rescued by her prince, in the form of the elderly Mrs Siddons, who arrives to assume from Emily responsibility for the care her mentally-disabled niece. Mrs Siddons is an impoverished clergyman’s widow, a ‘small, elderly woman, with thin, short hair. A hand-knitted jumper was stretched tightly to her flat chest [...] A tangle of veins on her cheeks [...] timid and eager’. (TSB, 216-217).

Yet while there are many 'mirrorings' in Taylor's characterisation of her two heroines, the reflection, like Betty's mirror, is distorted. Where the middle-class Emily is depicted as utterly placid, passing much of her time languidly sewing while staring out to sea – the sewing an obvious allusion to the fairy-story intertext – the working-class Betty, despite her seeming powerlessness, is an altogether more spirited individual, bent on actively pursuing her dreams. A determined young woman, she had trained at college, hoping to better herself and escape forever her humble working-class origins. With humour and poignancy, Taylor encapsulates the antipathy the fastidious Betty feels towards her home. She tells Laurence: "You can't imagine how disgusting it is – having to go to the lavatory at the bottom of the garden, and washing at the scullery sink. Then the kitchen's too hot and smells of Grandma's Germolene, or else she's soaking her feet." (TSB, 130) On her evening off, Betty sheds her post as nursery-maid along with her despised uniform, and in her brand new turquoise coat, goes in search of fun and adventure, and of course, young men. Before the mirror she rehearses her responses to these imaginary suitors: 'I beg *yours* [...] I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure [...] I certainly am *not* going your way.' (TSB, 83) Clearly, in Betty the text disrupts the dominant paradigm of the passive, albeit strange, princess by introducing a counter model, thus both accepting and rejecting the fairytale heroine.

Betty's servant-figure is given a second significant task in the text. Taylor sets out to destabilise the rigid barriers that divide people, and uses her fictive servant as a catalyst for an examination of class, gradations of class

and snobbery. Within the narrative the working class is far from homogenous: amongst the marginal characters we find Betty's aspiring working-class figure juxtaposed with the unreconstructed working-class members of her family, and Laurence's Army friend, Len.<sup>59</sup> Unsurprisingly, the unworldly Betty looks up to the middle-class characters, however offensive, even as she looks down on Len, whom she dismisses as "really common" (TSB, 200), a phrase to appal Laurence's mother, Isabella. In Isabella, a second wicked-fairy figure, Taylor embodies the worst kind of middle-class snobbishness, allowing her to condemn herself through word and deed. Much to Isabella's displeasure, Laurence chooses to complete his National Service as an Army private amongst 'Lens and Syds and Rons' (TSB, 86). Within parentheses and without comment, the following sentence appears in the text: "Surely, dear, you don't call them by their Christian names?" (TSB, 86) At school, of course, his friends had names such as 'Hay-Hardy and Ross-Amberley and Bagshot-Hepburn Minor.' (TSB, 86) Imprisoned in his own middle-class awkwardness, Laurence admires and envies his new friend, Len, not least for the easy banter he has with his mother. And while Isabella happily tolerates Len, enjoying his compliments and flattery, she predictably disapproves of her son's new girlfriend, Betty, for unlike Betty, Len is no threat: "his kind are really the backbone of the country. In wars, and so on", Isabella comments patronisingly (TSB, 203).

At an excruciating tea-party, Isabella's condescension towards Betty is both acute and embarrassing: 'She was dreadfully at Isabella's mercy, they all

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<sup>59</sup> Laurence and Len may well be a development of Thomas and Syd, who appear in Taylor's 1951 short story, 'Oasis of Gaiety'.



saw. She accepted or refused what was offered with a startled alacrity' (TSB, 205). The narrator's sympathy lies unfailingly with Betty. Yet, the text suggests that she and Isabella have more in common than either could imagine: both are disappointed by Laurence's lack of drive, both deplore his non-commissioned status. Moreover, they are equally dismayed by his defiant (but not, in fact, serious) proposal to become a farm-labourer. "You don't know what poverty is like", Betty tells him. "Your mother is right. You would be wasting yourself", touchingly concluding with: "You can bear anything is you've got a nice home to go back to, with a bathroom and so on." (TSB, 212) Even as Betty dreams of a fairytale future, the possibility of it ever becoming a reality is undermined by the reference to an unreal, never-ending summer: 'a small house surrounded by laburnums, in a quiet neighbourhood, far from her parents, with Laurence returning home to her in the early evening, in early summer, *which it would always be.*' (TSB, 199, my italics)

Nevertheless, as in all satisfactory fairy stories, love triumphs and both couples contemplate marriage. The awakening of our four heroes and heroines is complete. Experiencing love has given Laurence the confidence to forge a new relationship with his mother, while Betty dreams of becoming Laurence's wife in her own little house. Vinny, who by middle-age had scarcely ever experienced desire, is sexually awakened at last, and Emily is released from her enchanted state. The ending, however, is ambiguous. Not only do both couples have 'wicked-fairy' figures troubling their destinies, but imprisonment and a suggestion of Vinny's ill-health loom over the primary

duo: 'he had begun of late to feel breathless when going upstairs [...] he could hear an annoying buzzing in his head, and his temples throbbed. (TSB, 103) Furthermore, the text hints that Emily, 'once avowedly amorous; perhaps promiscuous as well', a woman Vinny suspects of relishing 'carnality for its own sake', may well, now reawakened, seek out more sexually-adventurous lovers (TSB, 144-145).

As for poor Betty, just as another fairytale servant-figure, Cinderella, must return to the kitchen after the ball, so she must return to her textual 'reality', her function as servant of the text completed, replaced by the impotence of her nursery-maid's role. To London she must return with her employers. As one of her charges comments perceptively in response to Betty's fun-fair fortune card, "It is very true [...] You are going all the way to London tomorrow: although travel doesn't come *your way*; you have to go *its*." (TSB, 219) It seems there may be no permanent escape for a literary servant, even a determinedly aspiring one. That Laurence will seek out Betty in London and offer marriage into the middle classes is left open. And if so, would this match her expectations? At their first encounter, in a cinema, the film showing is a discourse on 'the humbling by love of a too rebellious young woman' (TSB, 87). As the narrator sardonically concludes, 'even if she triumphs over the rigours of the jungle, no woman escapes the doom of her sexuality: a satisfactory conclusion; no surprise to anyone' (TSB, 87-88). The text argues, albeit playfully, that the two heroines are destined to replace one form of confinement with another, whether for better or worse is not clear.

## ***Angel***

As with the servant-figures in Taylor's first two 1950s novels, the two I examine in *Angel* are in the employ of both text and author, servants of and within the text. *Angel* is atypical amongst Taylor's novels in two senses: first, it is her only historical novel; and second, its narrative spans the whole life of its protagonist, Angel. This would prove a challenge for Taylor; as she writes to Liddell, 'I just love to write scenes, but how can I cover fifty years like that?'<sup>60</sup> *Angel* opens in 1901 and closes sometime after the Second World War. Plainly, at the end of the Victorian era a lady's maid was essential within upper-class households, and a chauffeur was equally familiar amongst the wealthy after the First World War. Thus, even as both fictive servants under examination fit their time, they will always remain outsider-figures within their employers' middle- and upper-class households. It is their anachoristic status that enables them to critique their 'betters', and this Taylor exploits in the novel. Like Elke in *A Game of Hide and Seek*, the lady's maid, Lottie, acts as servant-narrator in the first part of the novel, disseminating life in Paradise House, thereby moulding and driving the early narrative. And like Betty in *The Sleeping Beauty*, the chauffeur, Marvell, offers a working-class commentary on the conduct and customs of the middle classes. Additionally, these two eccentric figures provide the text with moments of Taylor's characteristic strangeness.

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<sup>60</sup> Taylor to Robert Liddell, April 1956, Taylor Papers, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 290.

There is an irony in Taylor creating during the 1950s, a pre-modernist, pre-Woolf novelist, *Angel*, who writes throughout the modernist epoch without any reference to the most significant literary movement of the period, one that certainly influenced her creator. But Taylor's novel is a self-conscious pastiche of a melodramatic historical novel, one in which *Angel* is allowed to refuse her fate outlined in the opening passage of this chapter. In many historical novels – and, indeed, nineteenth-century novels – a position as lady's maid to Madam's daughter, *Angelica*, would be *Angel*'s inevitable destiny. She and *Angelica* are doubles at different points on a 'reality–fantasy' scale: one has lived a life of luxury attended by an army of servants in the sumptuous surroundings of Paradise House, and the other merely pretends she has. As a Victorian working-class girl, *Angel*'s only escape from the borders of someone else's life into the heart of her own is via her pen. Her ability to reinvent herself as the female lead in a series of increasingly implausible fantasy worlds will make her fortune; the relative positions of the duo are set to shift. Ironically, the would-be servant becomes the successful writer of melodramatic fiction that the would-be mistress delights in reading.

If, as Peter Brooks argues, melodrama is the 'literary aesthetic of excess', then Taylor owes much to melodrama in *Angel*.<sup>61</sup> To an extent, however, she also subverts the form. According to Brooks, melodrama is an attempt to make the ordinary interesting and extraordinary, achieving this through the application of hyperbolic language and actions. Further, with its 'logic of the

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<sup>61</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination : Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985). p. 202. See for example *Angel*'s deathbed scene, worthy of any melodrama, pp. 248-249.

excluded middle', melodrama is preoccupied with extremes and opposites.<sup>62</sup> Angel and Angelica are undoubtedly polar opposites, but unusually it is the disadvantaged character who is constructed as extraordinary, while the privileged Angelica is inexorably ordinary. Indeed, far from being beautiful and accomplished, as might be expected, Angelica is an 'opinionated little madam', 'plump', with 'insipid looks and her hands rough as boys' (ANG, 14). This contrasts sharply with Angel's own fictional heroines who conform entirely to the template of romantic melodrama. In doubling Angelica with Angel, Taylor is clearly playing with the genre.

On numerous occasions Taylor records how gruelling she found the writing process; thus she may well have created Angel as her alter ego, a writer endowed with supreme confidence, entirely undisturbed by self-doubt.<sup>63</sup> Where Taylor struggles to blend the strange with the true, Angel is never troubled by reality. In this self-reflexive text exploring concepts of author and authority, Taylor envisages Angel as author/heroine of her own life and that of her novels. In time Angel, like Taylor, will become controller of her own servants, both fictional and 'real'. As Lottie reflects pointedly, "the wrong people have come to the top these days and the real gentry have to reduce [...] Miss Angelica wasn't brought up to do a great deal for herself." (ANG, 203) Angel's thoughts fly immediately to the stockings we encountered at the beginning of the chapter.

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 14, 15.

<sup>63</sup> Taylor comments in 1945 that she 'writes slowly and without enjoyment', in Mukherjee, "A Fiendish Mood." p. 37 (from the first edition dust-jacket, Elizabeth Taylor, *At Mrs Lippincote's*, 1945). And in August 1946 she complains in a letter to Russell that perfecting her particular style of writing was proving 'perilous & difficult', quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 166.

Though Angel's Aunt Lottie may have little status in the customarily ambivalent position of family retainer, she gains substantial authority in her narratorial role. By creating for the servant a distinct and well-developed voice, and inviting her to report from behind the metaphorical baize-covered door, Taylor shifts her from the periphery into the narrative proper, allowing the author an external centre of consciousness – 'an otherness' beyond her own experience – from which to view the upper classes. Lottie is lady's maid to Madam, an unnamed textual shadow throughout. Since the reader is denied entry to Paradise House until Angel becomes owner, Taylor entrusts to her servant, Lottie, the task of narrating the story of the big house and its wealthy residents. *Angel's* extradiegetic narrator relinquishes for a time her role, ceding to Lottie this authoritative task. As Henry James notes in his preface to *The Turn of the Screw*, giving his governess-narrator "'authority" [...] is a good deal to have given her'.<sup>64</sup> Robbins, too, acknowledges the power afforded to 'the teller of a tale', citing the Pemberley housekeeper in *Pride and Prejudice* as illustration.<sup>65</sup> The radically different picture the housekeeper paints of Darcy and Wickham causes Elizabeth and her aunt to question their prejudices: 'they soon became sensible, that the authority of a servant [...] was not to be hastily rejected'.<sup>66</sup> Yet, while necessary for presenting another side to the male protagonists, Austen's servant-narrator is little more than an exemplar of Robbins' nineteenth-century plot device, dropped into the text for a few scenes to effect change in the narrative.

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<sup>64</sup> Henry James, *The Ghost Stories of Henry James* (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2001). p. 6, and noted in Robbins, *The Servant's Hand : English Fiction from Below*. p. 91.

<sup>65</sup> Robbins, *The Servant's Hand : English Fiction from Below*. pp. 91 and 127.

<sup>66</sup> Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) (Middlesex: Penguin, 1972). p. 284.

Taylor's servant-narrator, Lottie, on the other hand, has a more active, authoritative part to play. In a sense it is Lottie who, as intradiegetic servant-narrator, drives the plot: her stories of the house and its inhabitants stimulate Angel's imagination, providing her with source material to weave into her early fictional extravaganzas, setting her on the path of famous novelist. Moreover, she fuels Angel's unquenchable desire to become mistress of Paradise House. Not only does Lottie gain authority in her function as the text's temporary narrator, but she is afforded a 'life', a substantial presence in the text, given a personality, a psychology and a history. Yet, as with James's governess and Brontë's Nelly Dean, Lottie is an unreliable narrator: the trustworthiness of her testimony is doubtful. Amongst the many kinds of unreliable narration and the various motives for its introduction, the device may be used to create an ironic disjunction between what a character believes she is saying and how this is interpreted by the reader.

In his analysis of *Wuthering Heights*, Miller writes of 'the fissure between what Lockwood apparently knows or intends to say, and what the author may have known or intended to say.'<sup>67</sup> In *Angel* author and reader are co-conspirators, sharing an interpretation not intended by the speaker, Lottie. Taylor introduces Lottie's naïve gossip to establish the worthlessness of her employers, and in the process adds considerably to the novel's humour. While a servant should be utterly devoted to her mistress, Lottie must serve two mistresses with conflicting demands. Her loyal reports of her mistress's

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<sup>67</sup> J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition : Seven English Novels* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982). p. 56.

ineffable goodness are instantly undermined by Madam's obviously high-handed behaviour: "I sometimes wonder what Madam would do without me [...] I don't think she could put on her own stockings, nor lay her hands on anything. 'Where's this? Where's that?' it is from morn till night." This is juxtaposed with: "I sometimes think we're more like sisters. I went on her honeymoon with her" (ANG, 36), implying an intimacy largely negated by her previous remarks.<sup>68</sup>

Angel's rejection of the lady's-maid offer prompts Lottie's sarcastic invective which, though directed towards Angel, surely better describes Lottie's mistress – 'giving yourself superior airs', 'being too grand to lift your hand to help another':

"I see that I have looked upon my work wrongly all these years. [...] I see that humility and unselfishness and ungrudging work are not what are respected. Oh, quite the reverse. It's setting yourself up as high as you can; giving yourself superior airs, however unwarranted; being too grand to lift your hand to help another, not even your own mother, that's what's to be respected" (ANG, 47).

There is clearly a disconnect between what Lottie means to say and how she is understood by author and reader. Her dual function gives her authority as the text's occasional narrator, turning a subaltern's unwitting gaze on the excesses of a privileged family, while simultaneously requiring her to be subservient within her textual role. And yet Lottie, as lady's maid, has more power than is first obvious. It is no accident that the nameless Madam is an

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<sup>68</sup> The notion of a mistress and her maid being like sisters was first raised in Taylor's 1954 novella, *Hester Lilly*. In a discussion on the postwar rise of the working class, the strange Miss Dispenser states with unintended irony that "my mother's maid was like a sister to her. Two sisters. Peas in a pod." (HL, 47)



indistinct figure. There is a sense in which she is the creation of the maid, oddly inverting the traditional mistress–servant binary:

“I always feel proud of her when she goes down to dinner. Like on her wedding-day. She was a credit to me then. I’ve never seen gloves on any lady that fit like hers. When she goes to the Opera you’d think they’d grown on her: not a wrinkle anywhere. I glue the tops of them to her arms with a touch of spirit gum. I suppose it’s a work of art, which sometimes she hasn’t the patience for. Miss Angelica comes in and reads to her when she gets restless.”  
(ANG, 37)

Taylor must surely have enjoyed envisioning such an absurd image. Here we are offered yet another version of Frankenstein, as Lottie fashions her own masterpiece. The idea of Madam standing passively while her gloves are glued to her arms to appear as if they had grown on her is bizarre, invoking images of an inanimate shop mannequin being dressed for display in the window. Nevertheless, Lottie’s descriptions are the foundation of Angel’s peculiar fiction: ‘It will do for Haven Castle, Angel was thinking. Irania, the heroine, lolled on a couch whilst someone like Aunt Lottie put on her stockings: with her gloves glued to her arms, she sat in a box at the Opera. (ANG, 37)

My final literary servant, Marvell, brings further moments of absurdity to this already strange text. Entering the novel as the First World War draws to a close, he thereafter plays a key part in the narrative. Though *Angel* encompasses two world wars, they themselves barely feature. As in *A Game of Hide and Seek*, war is almost unmentionable: the uncompromising Angel declares in 1914 that talk of war is banished from Paradise House.

Continuing to favour fantasy over reality, she retreats into novel-writing, ironically producing angry and aggressive novels espousing pacifism, thus alienating her loyal readers. The First World War, however, is not entirely expunged: through her husband, Esmé, we learn briefly of ‘the horrors of trench-warfare that day after day he had to endure, the demoralising rain and mud, barbed wire, gunfire’ (ANG, 164), and ‘the rats and lice, the flat, sodden landscape [...] its noise and his fear of it.’ (ANG, 188)

The wily Marvell, however, contrives to avoid both world wars. He is reminiscent of Green’s servant-figure, Raunce, in *Loving*: to both servants morality is a relativist concept, having more to do with expediency than any fundamental principles. Both are outsiders, observers, who manipulate circumstances to their own ends. No stereotypical literary servant, Marvell is given an authentic presence in the text, a presence that is the antithesis of subservience. His fiery relationship with his mistress, Angel, is one of near equality – if anything, the mistress–servant binary is weighted in his favour. In naming the chauffeur Marvell, Taylor may have intended an ironic allusion to the metaphysical poet, Andrew Marvell, and his poem ‘To His Coy Mistress’, from which Taylor quotes in *A Game of Hide and Seek*. Angel, of course, is anything but a ‘coy mistress’.<sup>69</sup>

We are first introduced to Marvell by Angel’s companion, Nora. She describes him as “a little odd in the head” as a consequence of an “abscess on the brain” that has excused him from the First World War (ANG, 169).

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<sup>69</sup> See *A Game of Hide and Seek*, p.40: ‘Time’s wingèd chariot’. That Taylor quotes from Marvell in *A Game of Hide and Seek* is noted in John Crompton’s thesis. Crompton, “All Done by Mirrors: Reflectivity in the Novels of Elizabeth Taylor (1912-75)”.

Far from simple, however, Marvell uses 'his loaf' (ANG, 172) to escape the conflict, constructing for himself a life of ease. His anachoristic status in the text is reinforced by his 'outsider' domestic space. Occupying rooms above the stables, he is separated both from his fellow servants and from his employers' sphere of influence, bragging to Esmé that he has made 'the snuggest, most leisurely life he could, camping out in cosy squalor (ANG, 172).<sup>70</sup> Indeed, both Angel and Esmé find comfort within his home. It is Esmé to whom Marvell first attaches himself, sharing with him a life of indolence. And since Esmé is confined to a wheelchair, Marvell holds the balance of power. Taylor creates a vivid image of the odd couple: 'Marvell puffing and groaning as he pushed and Esmé snapping at him, enjoying their strange companionship all the same.' (ANG, 190) Co-conspirators, they get drunk, go horse-racing, and shoot ducks secretly in the woods. Like naughty schoolboys they make mischief while their mistress/wife, Angel, buries herself in her writing. Marvell clearly benefits from Esmé's physical dependence, so when Esmé acquires a self-propelling wheelchair, Marvell's plans are thwarted: it 'might in time lessen his own power to arrange his life as it most suited him. He was now sometimes obliged to stay at work' (ANG, 196).

It is, however, Marvell's increasing intimacy with Angel that dominates the final part of the narrative. As in *A Game of Hide and Seek*, time passes in

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<sup>70</sup> The character of Marvell chimes with Bowen's equally unlikely chauffeur, Prothero, in her short story, 'The Disinherited', first published in 1934. Prothero too lives above the stables, separate from his employers. He too lacks the appropriate level of subservience required of a servant. He is, however, a murderer, whereas Marvell's past is unknown. Elizabeth Bowen, *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*, Vintage Classics (London: Vintage, 1999). pp. 375-407.

the space between sections, where a period of fifteen years disappears between Esmé's death in part 4 and the opening of part 5. By the 1930s Angel and Marvell are becoming increasingly mutually-dependent, as their relationship slips from mistress–servant to something much more equal. He is Angel's only touchstone with reality: while everyone else conspires to maintain her in a state of unreality, Marvell neither lies to, nor humours her; no one but he would dare criticise her. And Taylor creates some of her most memorably outlandish scenes and dialogue to exemplify their strange intimacy. Here is the apparently superior mistress having her hair washed in an outhouse just as a distinguished visitor arrives:

In a wash-house, he found Angel bending over a mangle; her long wet hair was between the rollers, and Marvell was turning the handle. [...] "I am nearly ready," said Angel in a muffled voice. She could see only the visitor's feet in the doorway. When Marvell released her hair from the rollers, she swept it back over the towel on her shoulders, straightened herself and held out a wet hand in greeting. [...] "He always washes my hair and it dries much quicker that way", she explained. (ANG, 206)

The original 'Madam' of Paradise House would, of course, have had her hair washed by her lady's maid in her bathroom. Now Madam is replaced by the eccentric Angel, the bathroom by an outside wash-house, and the lady's maid by a middle-aged, cantankerous chauffeur who clearly has his mistress where he wants her. Furthermore, neither character is shown to consider their behaviour strange. Later, following a quarrel, Marvell exclaims: "And that's the last time I'll wash your hair for you, madam. You'll see. It can get crumbly with nits for all I care." (ANG, 214) The 'madam' sits incongruously with the sentiments expressed.

After Esmé's death, the irritable Marvell becomes Angel's closest companion. Resembling a bickering old married couple, their arguments and abuse mask their deep affection. Clearly, Marvell is no inferior, obsequious servant, despite his continued use of the back door and the superficial 'madams'. Between mistress and servant there is near equality – the class barrier has been fatally breached. And not simply because they share humble beginnings: Angel has had innumerable servants whom she has treated with arrogance and condescension. It is that in Marvell she has met her match: both are spirited fighters, both survivors. As the Second World War arrives ('a personal annoyance to Angel, but nothing more' (ANG, 215)), Angel is ageing and

Marvell was old, too, and relentlessly rude; but was a part of her life. They had sharpened their wits on one another for years; he had seen her through her grief at Esmé's death: she was most bound to him when she was admonishing him, being admonished; and she struck off his anger purposely when she was bored, though knowing that his was always the last word. (ANG, 215)

Plainly, Taylor affords Marvell power in his textual roles as chauffeur, companion and confidant to his middle-class employers. Furthermore, as with many of the servant-figures examined, he is a servant of the text, deployed to be an external if unusual witness and commentator on the decline of the privileged classes. In fact, Marvell scorns rich and poor alike: the rich for ruling and the poor for being ruled. Yet Taylor allows him to exhibit an uncharacteristic blend of compassion and love towards Angel, thus continuing the theme of 'maternal' intimacy evident in *A Game of Hide and*

Seek – and this because of, not despite, her intractable self-deluding personality. Through Marvell's servant-figure, we are shown Angel's inherent vulnerability. War's end finds her living in squalor in the once splendid, now crumbling Paradise House, its irreversible decay symbolising the decline of the privileged classes, anticipating the shifting patterns in social and domestic life to come. Angel becomes a Miss Havisham figure: 'dreaming away her time, hunched over the fire in some tattered old gown, her hair half-pinned up, her eyes hooded by drooping lids.' (ANG, 234) After her death, the house would return once more to the earth. In an echo of the decaying houses in both *Palladian* and *To the Lighthouse*, albeit written in a parody of Angel's romantic overblown style, Paradise House's dilapidation is envisaged:

It would be engulfed in the valley, closed over and smothered by the encroaching branches; out-of-doors would creep indoors; first, ivy thrusting into crevices, feeling its way through broken windows and crumbling stone: bats would fly in through the empty fanlight and hang themselves from cornices in the hall [...] soft cobwebs drape the shutters. The tenacious vegetation of that lush valley would have its way there in the end. (ANG, 251-252)

With Angel dead, it is Marvell who is given the task of drawing the novel to a close. Indeed, in its circularity, *Angel* begins and ends with lower-class figures, suggesting the continuing survival of the class. Yet it is a bleak end. Marvell's prospects are as uncertain as those of the fictive figures who have gone before. After Angel's death Nora offers reassurance: "In time we shall get used to it, you know." But, 'Marvell looked grim. He tried steadfastly to ignore her words, which seemed aimed to break him. There is nothing left to get used to' (ANG, 252). Now elderly, Marvell is without job, home and, most

importantly, sparring partner. He does, however, inherit a motor-car, a symbol of movement, freedom and new possibilities – and a sign of the end of the deferential domestic servant. Given his cunning, tenacity and self-sufficiency, Marvell may yet survive a few more years.

## **Conclusion**

In life as in art, Taylor deplored the inequality of the traditional servant's lot. Indeed, young Hester in Taylor's 1954 novella, *Hester Lilly*, is perhaps voicing her author's opinion on the unfairness of needing to find happiness within such an inferior role: "It's wrong to be happy like that ... not to have your own life" [...] she felt a great sense of injustice somewhere, of sacrifices which ought not be asked or made.' (HL, 46-47) Nonetheless, Taylor's fiction is filled with these seemingly outdated figures, not least in her 1950s novels. Though written at the tail end of England's 'servant problem', her novels are silent on the subject: there is no servant problem in these texts. No mere 'voiceless tableaux' or uncomplicated plot devices, Taylor's fictive servants are given a textual authority that challenges their status as outmoded marginal characters and subservient figures. Yet her preoccupation with the evermore anachronistic servant-figure proved a weakness as well as a strength, allowing her novels to be judged increasingly old-fashioned. Indeed, Hensher notes that she 'must be the last serious English novelist with a consistent interest in domestic servants; her

housekeepers, cooks and companions provided ample ammunition for anyone wanting to arraign her for bourgeois cosiness.<sup>71</sup>

The use to which she puts these domestic servants, however, is far from old fashioned. Reeve observes that 'Taylor's novels of the 1950s are all interested in various forms of power – whether in connection with passionate desire, extraordinary beauty, or charismatic self-conviction.'<sup>72</sup> While he is alluding primarily to the novels' principal themes, this chapter has argued that Taylor also displays an interest in the power that can be bestowed upon the literary servant. Clearly, her fictive landscape privileges her own social milieu: the comfortable middle classes of the home counties – although, of course, in her hands their worlds are anything but comfortable. Because her servant-figures are at once in and out of place, belonging yet not belonging, they can provide Taylor with Bakhtin's 'other' viewpoint, an alterity otherwise denied her.

Neither patronised nor caricatured, these erstwhile liminal characters are put to work for author and text, becoming servants of and in the text, on occasion employed as servant-narrators to tell key parts of the narrative, or to observe and commentate on changing times. Indeed, the novelistic irony of deploying minor, working-class figures to undertake such major functions as reporting the aftermath of the Second World War cannot have escaped the Labour-voting Taylor. It is, for example, through the bewildered gaze of the servant-narrator, Elke, that the reader is shown the enduring effects of war

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<sup>71</sup> Hensher, "The Other Liz Taylor".

<sup>72</sup> Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 55.



and the resultant socio-economic and cultural transformations, not least the weakening of the traditional mistress–servant duality. Moreover, it is via Taylor’s servant-figures that we view the continuing survival of the working classes, however uncertain their futures may be.

Alongside the more profound uses for the servant-figure, Taylor employs the trope to inject into her literary aesthetic moments of high comedy and utter strangeness, from the sales ladies’ painful beauty treatments to Marvell’s bizarre hair-mangling, all of which serve to offset both the grim reality of austerity Britain and the bleakness inherent in Taylor’s novels. Behind her spare, carefully-wrought prose is an obvious pleasure in peculiarity, earthiness and bad behaviour. Indeed, the faintly coarse ingredient added at intervals refutes to an extent the reductive reputation Taylor had acquired by the 1950s as a genteel lady novelist. Hensher summarises this aspect of her writing: ‘What she loved best [...] were outbreaks of vulgarity, embarrassingly improper behaviour, people saying or doing exactly the wrong thing.’<sup>73</sup>

Outdated literary servants continue to be employed in Taylor’s 1960s and 1970s texts, when by this period the reality had all but disappeared from middle-class life, although possibly not in the Thames Valley. Her 1961 novel, *In a Summer Season*, for example, introduces a cook who wears a napkin on her head when cooking ‘as if she were a Stilton cheese’ (ISS, 24). And in Taylor’s last novel, *Blaming*, published posthumously, she animates one of her funniest characters, the ex-sailor turned housekeeper, Ernie

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<sup>73</sup> Hensher, "The Other Liz Taylor ".

Pounce, who has trouble with his dentures, producing a 'skeleton's grin' (BLA, 63). Indeed, her desire to create authentic comic dialogue is undiminished even in the last months of her life: "My leg's playing me up, been a bit chronic the last few days [...] It runs in the family. [...] my mother suffered [...] Her leg crept right up. When it reaches the thigh, it's supposed to be curtains" (BLA, 171).

The final use to which Taylor puts her fictive servants is to demonstrate and celebrate an intimacy between the classes, often to the point of maternal surrogacy, recasting the relationship between mistress and servant. The close bonds forged between women across the class divide, and the emotional strength such associations foster are well conceived. Yet Taylor does not shrink from articulating the harsher realities of life, especially if a woman and poor. As always in her fiction, marriage is a flawed experience. Nonetheless, no feasible alternative is proffered. While her female working-class figures gain authority as servants of both text and author, within their roles as minor characters they are shown as largely powerless and increasingly vulnerable as they age outside the protection of marriage. Ultimately Taylor's 1950s texts reach the conclusion that marriage with all its imperfections may be preferable to the single life, a theme that is explored in the following chapter, when I examine what it means to be a woman in a Taylor text.

## Chapter 4: On the Cusp of Feminism

### Introduction

In moving from the 1950s to the 1960s for an analysis of Taylor's fictive women, the concept of anachronism is privileged. Chapter 4 argues that, if Taylor's women seem increasingly out of step with their time, they nonetheless speak to their historical moment; that they are therefore in and out of time. The questions to be posed in the chapter are first, is there a sense in which Taylor's novels might be considered feminist; that is, could they be seen to interrogate, challenge or subvert the norms of society prevalent during her writing life?<sup>1</sup> And second, if this is so, could we term Taylor herself a feminist writer? To answer these questions, I examine what it means to be a woman in a Taylor novel, echoing the question Simone de Beauvoir set out to answer in her work of 1949, *The Second Sex*: 'What has it meant to me to be a woman?'<sup>2</sup> I am, of course, conscious of the distinction between engaging in a feminist reading and asserting the text itself to be feminist, and indeed in proclaiming the writer a feminist. Elizabeth Bowen, for example, considered herself neither a feminist nor a feminist writer, and yet there have been a number of insightful feminist readings of her fiction.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> When I refer to society, patriarchal society or patriarchy in this study, I am using de Beauvoir's understanding of the term: 'Western society created by man, in which man saw himself as the norm and woman as his 'other'; 'it is the society developed by the males and in their own interest'. In this society woman must invariably fit herself to man and his life. See Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. pp. 16, 500.

<sup>2</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Andre Deutsch Ltd and George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd, 1965). p. 94.

<sup>3</sup> Bowen's relationship with feminism was complex. Despite her declared views, a number of critics have produced feminist readings of her novels, and, further, judge her to be a feminist writer. See, for example, Renee C. Hoogland, *Elizabeth Bowen : A Reputation in Writing*, *The Cutting Edge : Lesbian Life and Literature* (New York ; London: New York University

In Taylor's case, I see the distinctions as somewhat blurred: while it is doubtful Taylor would have termed herself a feminist, she was clearly a political animal, and in her fiction she consciously makes the political personal. Her motivation was an intense loathing of injustice of any kind, not least that between the sexes. In a 1943 letter to her lover, Russell, she rages against the unfair compromises a woman, but not a man, must make to become a writer:

Jesus, I never can get over this [...] that I have got to choose. I know it is wrong that I have to. No man could ever know what it has been like, writing this novel, how much it has taken from me ... I don't think anything enrages me as much as seeing in famous men's autobiographies photographs of their studies, libraries, quiet places where they work. Then I think of Harriet Beecher Stowe with the yelling baby in one arm & a pen in the other hand.<sup>4</sup>

The letter goes on to recognise that working-class women fare even worse. A few years later Taylor was to continue this diatribe in *A View of the Harbour* where she animates her writer-figure, Beth, to rail against the inequality between the perceived value of men's and women's work: "your patronising airs, as if only men's work is important, and my writing an irritating and rather shameful habit ... 'If we ignore it, she will grow out of it,' you seem to imply." (AVH, 241) Such sentiments articulated in the 1940s suggest an engagement with and commitment to a feminist agenda, a commitment I claim continues into the 1960s.

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Press, 1994). Hoogland describes Bowen as 'a truly radical, innovative and critically practicing feminist.' p. 20.

<sup>4</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell, 24 June 1943, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. pp. 153-154.

During this decade Taylor published three novels: *In a Summer Season* (1961), *The Soul of Kindness* (1964) and *The Wedding Group* (1968), though the first of these was actually written and set in the late 1950s, on the threshold of a new decade and a new society, and located between de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and Betty Friedan's early second-wave feminist text, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).<sup>5</sup> Women in the 1950s were subject to both political and cultural pressure to embrace domesticity and family life, thus providing the social stability the nation required for economic growth in the aftermath of war. Yet the same economic growth required women to be in the workplace; and indeed, there was a steady increase in married women in employment, either before or after a period of full-time motherhood.

This tension between women's conflicting roles was recognised as a major 'woman problem', one explored extensively in a well-known 1956 study by two feminists, Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein. Theirs was the first to suggest, albeit tentatively, that professional women should be able to enjoy both career and family life, if not necessarily concurrently, a theme later pursued in Friedan's work.<sup>6</sup> As with many feminists of the period, their focus was primarily on educated middle-class women. Technological improvements in the home had reduced the time-consuming nature of housework (for those who could afford them), leaving women with more free time – but free to do

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<sup>5</sup> For a reading of Taylor's novels alongside *The Feminine Mystique*, see Elizabeth Maslen, "Elizabeth Taylor and the Fictions of The Feminine Mystique", in N. H. (ed.) Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor: A Centenary Celebration* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). pp. 133-148.

<sup>6</sup> Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, *Women's Two Roles : Home and Work*, International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction (London: Routledge & Paul, 1956). See also Jane Lewis' chapter, 'Myrdal, Klein, *Women's Two Roles* and Postwar Feminism 1945-1960', in Harold L. Smith, ed. *British Feminism in the Twentieth Century* (Aldershot: Elgar, 1990). pp. 167-188.

what? Taylor's fictive women are almost exclusively housewives and mothers, and the question of how to pass their time is a recurrent and insistent motif throughout her oeuvre; indeed, Taylor constructs a genealogy of women who contemplate, but cannot solve, the problem of women's lives.

As the 1950s gave way to the more prosperous 1960s, extensive socio-political and cultural unrest occurred, including the rise of the women's movement. With the introduction of the contraceptive pill for married women in 1961, women were for the first time freed from the fear of pregnancy, and the 'permissive society' was set to begin. Feminism, however, while progressing quietly throughout the 1950s, was weak and fractured, lacking common goals. Many feminist activists rejected women's issues in favour of more publicly political matters: campaigns against the atomic bomb, for example.<sup>7</sup> Thus the prevailing sexual ideology and societal norms went largely unchallenged. As Sue Bruley notes, feminist ideology 'was largely obscured by the general view that women, freed from the drudgery and oppression of the past, now basked in "equality in difference".'<sup>8</sup> Feminism itself was thought by many to be an anachronism: the fight was won.<sup>9</sup> This, of course, was a reductive and mistaken view of woman's position within society, one that was challenged both by *The Second Sex* and *The Feminine Mystique*. While neither text sets out to demolish the status quo, their entry

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<sup>7</sup> For an account of a 'Women Against the Bomb' meeting in London in 1958, see Jacqetta Hawkes, "Women against the Bomb," *The Twentieth Century*, no. Special Number on Women (August 1958). pp. 185-188. (Speakers included Marghanita Laski, Iris Murdoch, Peggy Ashcroft, and Rose Macaulay. Messages of support were sent by Elizabeth Bowen and Rosamund Lehmann.) The 'Special Number on Women' itself offers valuable insights into the largely conservative views of educated women in late-1950s society.

<sup>8</sup> Sue Bruley, *Women in Britain since 1900*, Social History in Perspective (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999). p. 145.

<sup>9</sup> See the introduction to Dowson, ed. *Women's Writing, 1945-60 : After the Deluge*.

onto the British scene acted as catalysts for the elevation of feminist consciousness in the early 1960s.

The majority of Taylor's 1960s women experience lives that are evermore anachronistic, unchanged since the 1940s, and it is to de Beauvoir's 1949 text and its examination of the sex/gender dialectic that I turn for my theoretical underpinning. *The Second Sex* was a genre-breaker: neither simply politics, nor philosophy, nor a self-help guide, but a blend of all three. Its critique of the social construction of gender, with its emphasis on women's equality and fulfilment in a man's world, shaped feminist theory and practice at mid-century. My contention is that, just as Taylor's women look back to an earlier era, her 1960s texts look back to *The Second Sex* in their dramatisations of a number of de Beauvoir's feminine constructs. Moreover, Taylor and de Beauvoir reach similar conclusions on women's existence at mid-century: women are consistently reduced to the position of man's 'other'.<sup>10</sup>

To be a woman in a Taylor text is primarily to be a middle-class housewife and mother living a life of domesticity in the conservative heartland, a figure that as the decade progressed felt increasingly out of harmony with the times. Indeed, while Taylor's 1960s fiction was generally well received, a number of reviewers hinted at a creeping 'old-fashionedness'.<sup>11</sup> As Erica

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<sup>10</sup> When 'other' is placed in parentheses in this chapter, it is being used in de Beauvoir's sense of the word.

<sup>11</sup> Jocelyn Brooke, *The Spectator*, 25 September 1964 (*The Soul of Kindness*); Richard Mayne, *New Statesman*, 28 April 1961 (*In a Summer Season*); *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 September 1964 (*The Soul of Kindness*); Janice Elliott, *New Statesman*, 3 May 1968 (*The Wedding Group*); Paul Scott, *The Times*, 27 April 1968 (*The Wedding Group*).

Brown observes, Taylor's 'kind of sophistication was old-fashioned and associated with nostalgia, at a time when literary critics were looking for raw newness.'<sup>12</sup> What is of particular note, however, is the sheer number of lost female figures leading desolate and empty lives in a state of stagnation. In an undated letter to Robert Liddell, Taylor observes: 'I think loneliness is a theme running through many of my novels and short stories, the different ways in which individuals can be isolated from others'.<sup>13</sup> While she writes of 'individuals', in practice the majority are women.

Within Taylor's fictive landscape marriage and motherhood are incompatible with a life of potential. Yet in Taylor's hands these females are more than mere anachronistic figures: what her 1960s fiction does most successfully in foregrounding such emptiness, is question and challenge the society that engenders this state. This she can achieve in her novels in a more immediate and intimate way than is possible within de Beauvoir's factual account of women's lives, not least because she can breathe life into her women, exposing their inner thoughts and feelings. Moreover, Taylor can braid the political with the personal, sneaking between the textual crevices polemical ideas that disrupt the status quo. Indeed, there is something almost subversive about concealing a political existential discourse between the pretty covers of her outwardly conventional fiction; as with all Taylor's work, her 1960s fiction repays close reading. Clearly, works of fiction reach a wider audience than polemical works: more women will engage with the imagined lives of Taylor's women, and as a result contemplate their own

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<sup>12</sup> Brown, *Comedy and the Feminine Middlebrow Novel : Elizabeth Von Arnim and Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 112.

<sup>13</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 103.



lived experiences. It is surely no exaggeration to suggest that Taylor is knowingly engaging in a form of literary consciousness-raising. Yet her texts hesitate on the threshold of articulating alternative, more fulfilling lives for her women. Fixed in her temporal and spatial moment, Taylor is unable to take the novel or her women forward. Her own situation as a middle-aged woman in the 1960s hinders her ability to solve woman's dilemma, to imagine a better future; we must look to the next generation of women writers to discover a more emancipated construct of the feminine within the domestic.

In what follows I pay attention to different constructs of the feminine, that is to say, to fictive women placed in various situations: how they are portrayed in Taylor's imagined worlds, what they reveal about gender relations, and how they articulate sexual difference. Since the emergence of second-wave feminism, terms such as 'sex', 'gender', 'woman', 'female' and 'feminine' have been the subject of considerable debate within feminist criticism, reflecting the diverse approaches to the subject taken by, in particular, Anglo-American and French feminists. Since this chapter is underpinned by de Beauvoir's 'social construction of gender' thesis, it is appropriate to use 'feminine' and 'masculine' to represent gender as socially and culturally constructed, and 'female' and 'male' for the entirely biological elements of sexual difference. 'Woman' will follow de Beauvoir's usage, that is, in the quotidian sense of a person with a female body constructed as feminine, notwithstanding that there are women who fall outside this definition and, further, that there is much about woman which cannot be reduced to sexual

difference. Such was the customary understanding of the term 'woman' during the period in question.<sup>14</sup>

### ***The Second Sex***

While *The Second Sex* is considered by many to be the 'mother' of second-wave feminism, de Beauvoir at the time defined herself primarily as a socialist; only much later did her political existentialism evolve into feminism.<sup>15</sup> Her comprehensive analysis of women's oppression within patriarchal society and her existentialist argument for women's ultimate liberation had, according to Mary Beth Mader and Kelly Oliver, a 'catalytic impact on the French reading public, and on nascent women's liberation movements in many nations'.<sup>16</sup> Despite, or more probably because of, their stormy reception, the two volumes of *The Second Sex* each sold over 20,000 copies in France in the first week of publication.<sup>17</sup> Its impact was clearly felt in England following publication of a translated edition in 1953: fourteen

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<sup>14</sup> It is beyond the scope of this study to chart the development of twentieth-century Western feminist theory and its shift from women's equality to women's difference, but for example, Luce Irigaray resists de Beauvoir's equality agenda, celebrating instead women's difference, focusing on the body as metaphor. Irigaray's radical and provocative text, *This Sex Which is Not One*, challenges the notion of two sexes, arguing that her culture is 'monosexed': male. See Luce Irigaray, Catherine Porter, and Carolyn Burke, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler questions the universality of the category of 'women'. She also struggles with the concepts 'sex' and 'gender', arguing that sex is always already gender, that is, constructed. See 'Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire', in Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York ; London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> It was not until 1972 when she joined the women's movement, the MLF, that de Beauvoir declared herself a feminist. See Toril Moi, *Sexual-Textual Politics : Feminist Literary Theory*, New Accents (London: Methuen, 1985). pp. 91-92.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Beth Mader and Kelly Oliver, "French Feminism", in Robert C. Solomon and David Sherman, eds., *The Blackwell Guide to Continental Philosophy* (Malden, MA ; Oxford: Blackwell, 2003). p. 311.

<sup>17</sup> For a survey of the book's reception, see Jo-Ann Piliardi, "The Changing Critical Fortunes of the Second Sex," *History and Theory* 32, no. 1 (1993). 51-73.

paperback reprints were released between 1961 and 1962.<sup>18</sup> Given that *The Second Sex* was reviewed in a number of serious English and American newspapers and journals, including those read by Taylor, it is highly likely she was aware of de Beauvoir's controversial work.<sup>19</sup> *The Second Sex* was part of the cultural landscape in which Taylor was positioned at mid-century, and was certainly familiar to her good friend, Bowen: the frontispiece of Maud Ellmann's book contains a reproduction of a 1953 photograph of Bowen in a deckchair with a copy of *The Second Sex* on her lap.<sup>20</sup>

Grounded in Sartre's existentialist philosophy, de Beauvoir's text is preoccupied primarily with woman's alterity and lack of liberty: how woman functions chiefly as man's 'other', his opposite, setting up a dualism that pits passivity against activity, immanence against transcendence, object against subject. Thus woman is deprived of agency and the freedom to define herself on her own terms. According to de Beauvoir, 'humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him. [...] For him she is sex [...] He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other.'<sup>21</sup>

De Beauvoir argues that, since one human being amongst many must inevitably – and ambiguously – be both subject and object, a subject (man)

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<sup>18</sup> Birmingham Feminist History Group, "Feminism as Femininity in the Nineteen-fifties?", *Feminist Review*, no. 3 (1979) 48-65. p. 64.

<sup>19</sup> For example, reviews appeared in *The New Statesman* (14 November 1953), *The Times Literary Supplement* (1 January 1954), *The Nation* (21 February 1953), and *The New York Times Book Review* (22 February 1953), *The New Yorker* (28 February 1953 and 28 March 1953) and *The Atlantic* (April 1953) in America. See also Pilardi, "The Changing Critical Fortunes of the Second Sex."; Margaret Crosland, *Simone De Beauvoir: The Woman and Her Work* (London: Heinemann, 1992). pp. 369-373. At the time Taylor's short stories were frequently published in *The New Statesman* and *The New Yorker*.

<sup>20</sup> Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004). pp. 18-19.

<sup>21</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 16.

must reduce another subject (woman) to the status of object to avoid suffering the same fate from the other's perspective; this, man has achieved through his biological advantages. In existentialist terms, she is referring to the transcendence/immanence dichotomy: man has condemned woman to an uncreative, repetitive life of stagnation and immanence – the closed world of the domestic – while man, through external activities and enterprise, has had the opportunity to seek transcendence. It 'is still a world that belongs to men', observes de Beauvoir.<sup>22</sup> That woman has largely performed the roles allotted her by man, seemingly complicit in her position of 'vassalage', in no way legitimises patriarchy, argues de Beauvoir. Fiercely rejecting biological determinism, she contends that the female body is a necessary but insufficient condition to define woman. A woman's body alone can neither explain her alterity nor her social subordination. Refusing the notion of a female essence, she famously states: 'One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature [...] which is described as feminine.'<sup>23</sup>

In her lengthy historical analysis, de Beauvoir judges women harshly on occasion, making a number of startling generalisations, for example that menstruation engenders in the young girl only disgust 'at her too fleshly body [...] at the stagnant odour emanating from her [...] at this blood'.<sup>24</sup> Of the excessively house-proud wife, she writes: 'The maniac housekeeper wages her furious war against dirt, [...] She becomes bitter and disagreeable and

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p. 295.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p. 337-338.

hostile to all that lives; the end is sometimes murder.<sup>25</sup> The ageing woman attempting to retain her sexual allure fares no better: 'She babbles to men in a childish voice and with naïve glances of admiration [...] she chirps instead of talking, she claps her hands, she bursts out laughing'.<sup>26</sup> Refuting accusations of misogyny, however, de Beauvoir writes: 'I do not praise them to the skies and I have anatomized all those defects engendered by their condition, but I also showed their good qualities and their merits.'<sup>27</sup> Women are not to blame, however: it is woman's 'situation' – as indulged girl child, as wife, mother, unskilled worker – not her female body, nor any female essence, that has reduced her to the subordinate, accommodating creature she has become, occupied with the trivial and inessential, limited to a life of waiting in the present. Her argument is that a woman's situation need not shape her destiny: 'Let but the future be opened to her, and she will no longer be compelled to linger in the present'.<sup>28</sup>

De Beauvoir does not deny that a woman's body affects her lived experience, however. Indeed, as Kari Weil writes, *The Second Sex* was important 'for bringing the sexed body to the forefront of literary, political, and philosophical thought.'<sup>29</sup> Yet de Beauvoir's attitude to the female body is at best ambivalent. The body is at once a burden and a delight: 'a womb, an ovary' with all its associated discomforts;<sup>30</sup> and 'her glorious double',

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p. 471.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. p. 590.

<sup>27</sup> Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*. p. 189.

<sup>28</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 616.

<sup>29</sup> Kari Weil, "French Feminism's écriture feminine", in Ellen Rooney, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, Cambridge Companions to Literature. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). p. 155.

<sup>30</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 35. At one point de Beauvoir describes the foetus in the womb rather grotesquely as 'a bloody strawberry'. p. 609.

'promised happiness, work of art'.<sup>31</sup> Significantly, she describes woman as 'a becoming', an evolving being, not 'a completed reality': woman should be celebrated for her potential, her capabilities, 'her *possibilities*'.<sup>32</sup> To overcome her position of subjugation, de Beauvoir concludes, woman must realise equality and liberation via a new subjecthood – through economic, moral, social and cultural reform. As Moi suggests, by 'stressing the oppressive function of sexual ideology and social norms, *The Second Sex* develops a devastating critique of sexism. By stressing the fact that women's freedom and agency only rarely disappear entirely [...] Beauvoir produces a powerful vision of liberation: Beauvoir's women are victims of sexism, but potential revolutionaries too.'<sup>33</sup>

### ***In a Summer Season***

*In a Summer Season* (1961) is set in the late 1950s during a long hot summer within Taylor's customary world of the affluent middle classes, in this case those occupying large 1930s houses in London's commuter belt, described somewhat disparagingly by the protagonist, Kate Heron, as 'Underwriters' Georgian' (ISS, 23). A novel steeped in sexual desire and longing, it prompted Susanna Clapp to judge it appositely as Taylor's 'sexiest novel'.<sup>34</sup> It is thus fitting to focus on two key constructs of the feminine manifested in the narrative: 'the desiring' and 'the desired'; woman as subject

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 630.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p. 66.

<sup>33</sup> Toril Moi, *What Is a Woman? : And Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). p. 83.

<sup>34</sup> Susanna Clapp's Introduction to Elizabeth Taylor's *In a Summer Season* (London: Virago, 1983). p. v.

and woman as object. My concern is with how Taylor speaks both to the emerging socio-cultural landscape and to de Beauvoir's text: in short, how she writes the feminine. I argue that, whilst these two versions of the feminine may be viewed initially as binary opposites, increasingly they become intertwined, 'the desiring' with 'the desired', the subject with the object. That neither is allowed to survive unscathed suggests that Taylor's text, reflecting wider late-1950s society, is not ready for de Beauvoir's vision of the liberated woman. Nevertheless, the text goes beyond simply fictionalising de Beauvoir's discourse on the inadequacy of women's unvarying and unfulfilling lives; it attempts to critique the society that produces such waste.

According to de Beauvoir, woman lacks both sexual subjectivity and agency: man is defined as the active desiring subject and woman his passive desired object. *In a Summer Season* disrupts this binary, and in so doing questions woman's traditional marital position. Kate's second marriage, to Dermot, transgresses many of the conventions of traditional middle-class society: not only has she taken a man ten years her junior, indolent and financially dependent, but she, an independent middle-aged woman, has chosen him primarily for sexual pleasure. She is thus constructed principally as the desiring feminine, the subject to Dermot's object. Indeed, their marriage is built almost entirely on sex, closer to a fragile love affair. That sex is the glue that binds the couple is foregrounded by the many sensuous references to the body and lovemaking. Abandoning customary roles of wife and mother in favour of lover, 'Kate had taken to having [breakfast] in bed', in voluptuous

intimacy with her husband (ISS, 41). She loves to wear Dermot's clothes, 'feeling herself in his embrace whenever she did so.' (ISS, 122) And when on holiday, she 'was always glad to wake earlier than Dermot, [...] knowing that soon, while half asleep, he would [...] pull her close to him as if surprised that sleep had overcome him and interrupted last night's love.' (ISS, 106). Only during their moments of passion do Kate and Dermot become ambiguously both subject and 'other', as revealed in this scene, perhaps the most erotic in Taylor's oeuvre:

He drew her shoulders back against him and slid his hands inside her thin shirt. At once, she dropped her sewing into her lap and closed her eyes, hit unexpectedly by vertigo, by desire. For a second, pressing her head back hard against him, she wildly thought that she must have him take her, there, at that moment. (ISS, 152)<sup>35</sup>

While redolent of a Barbara Cartland romance, the phrase '*she* must have *him* take *her*', clearly complicates the subject/object dichotomy. 'Genuine love', contends de Beauvoir, 'ought to be founded on the mutual recognition of two liberties; the lovers would then experience themselves both as self and as other: neither would give up transcendence'.<sup>36</sup> Yet sexual love alone is not enough, according to de Beauvoir: 'Physical love can be treated neither as an end in itself nor as a mere means to an end; it cannot serve as a justification of existence'.<sup>37</sup> She goes further: 'If two lovers sink together in the absolute of passion, all their liberty is degraded into immanence; death is

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<sup>35</sup> *In a Summer Season* is not Taylor's first novel to celebrate the physicality of the female body, nor to consider female sexuality. In *At Mrs Lippincote's*, Taylor writes frankly of a woman's knickers 'flecked with blood', and of her lover who sees them, as loving her 'beyond being fastidious'. Taylor, *At Mrs Lippincote's*. p. 168.

<sup>36</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 677.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p. 466.



then the only solution.’<sup>38</sup> Though de Beauvoir is referring principally to the *Tristan and Isolde* myth, she might be anticipating the fate Taylor imagines for Kate and Dermot.

Within Kate the Cartesian mind/body duality is unreconciled: in her marriage to Dermot there is a meeting of bodies but not minds, a disconnect between ‘sense and sensuality’, as Catherine Belsey would put it.<sup>39</sup> Her aunt describes Kate’s first marriage as a ‘marriage of two minds’: ‘the evenings at the Queen’s Hall [...] and the books going to and fro with passages underlined.’ (ISS, 148) Indeed, it is Dermot’s ignorance of Henry James’ *The Spoils of Poynton* that comes to symbolise the chasm in the couple’s relationship. (ISS, 146-147) Even as Kate is constituted as the desiring subject, a fictive blend of de Beauvoir’s ‘married woman’ and her ‘woman in love’, it becomes clear that desire without a harmony of minds cannot long sustain a marriage. In a reversal of de Beauvoir’s account of traditional gender roles, Dermot, the younger, dependent partner, is animated in many ways as a stereotypical feminine construct, the ‘other’ to Kate’s subject; and the text demonstrates that man cannot successfully assume this subordinate position. As de Beauvoir argues, ‘[s]ave in crises of jealous frenzy, [woman] herself demands that man be all projects, all action, for he is no more a hero if he engages in no exploits’.<sup>40</sup> Since Dermot’s efforts to achieve transcendence through activities outside the home are invariably unsuccessful, his position as Kate’s ‘hero’ is somewhat tenuous: she reflects

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p. 668.

<sup>39</sup> Catherine Belsey, *Desire : Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). p. 26.

<sup>40</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 668.

that 'his modest attempts to make money ended in confusions of figures from which he could only extricate the fact that he had less than he had when he started.' (ISS, 45)

Dermot is thus articulated as an infantilised creature, one whom Kate must reluctantly mollify. At one point, Kate humours his 'huffy silence' with the offer of a new car: 'what kind do you think we should have?' (ISS, 167) Writes de Beauvoir, 'a whole tradition enjoins upon wives the art of "managing" a man; one must discover and humour his weaknesses and must cleverly apply in due measure flattery and scorn, docility and resistance, vigilance and leniency.'<sup>41</sup> Bored and feckless, Dermot is repeatedly described as 'childish', 'like a child'; Kate directs a 'motherly smile' towards him (ISS, 23). Thus her construction as desiring feminine becomes more problematic, infused as it is with the 'maternal feminine', introducing something incestuous, almost Oedipal, into their relationship. And since neither manages to transcend a life of domesticity in any productive sense, both Kate and Dermot find themselves condemned to immanence – to repetition and stagnation.

The frail marriage is doomed, not least because it must be enacted in full view of a largely disapproving audience. As Susan Sontag comments in her 1960s defence of literary pornography, he 'who transgresses not only breaks a rule. He goes somewhere that the others are not; and he knows

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p. 487.

something the others don't know.'<sup>42</sup> Not only have Kate and Dermot destabilised the institution of mid-century marriage, they have entered a secret world of passion far beyond the knowledge and experience of their observers. 'Desire, even when it is profoundly conventional, is at the same time the location of a resistance to convention', suggests Besley.<sup>43</sup> Chief amongst the observers is Aunt Ethel, a spinsterly ex-suffragette who, having absolutely no experience of the 'physical side' as she quaintly puts it, feels entirely qualified to discuss sex with her fellow ex-suffragette, Gertrude. Ethel voices the prevailing view of their marriage within late-1950s society: "she has bought him for herself [...], and one day he, Dermot, will begin to find that being her property is irksome. Then, when the physical side grows less important, she may think she hasn't got her money's worth." (ISS, 47) In its depiction of the elderly suffragette, the text is exemplifying the disjunction between 'the personal and the political', common in both life and fiction at this time: despite her first-wave feminist credentials, Ethel fails to recognise as progressive the reversal of gender roles performed by Kate and Dermot. In practice, there was no continuum between first-wave feminism and the later phase; the personal did not inform the political until the late 1960s, when the existential impoverishment of women's lives moved into the public arena.<sup>44</sup> Juliet Mitchell argues that the 'wider legacy of the suffrage was nil: the suffragettes proved quite unable to move beyond their own initial

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<sup>42</sup> Susan Sontag, "The Pornographic Imagination" (1967), in Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye* (London: Penguin, 1982). p. 116.

<sup>43</sup> Belsey, *Desire : Love Stories in Western Culture*. p. 7.

<sup>44</sup> Yet Edith does imagine Kate's daughter as 'England's first woman judge'. p. 43. A slightly more positive view of the struggles of the Suffragette movement is provided in Taylor's earlier novel, *A Game of Hide and Seek*, although even here the two ex-suffragettes are seen as an embarrassment to the next generation. See Taylor, *A Game of Hide and Seek*. p. 3.

demands, and many of their leading figures later became extreme reactionaries.<sup>45</sup>

In addition to leading the chorus of censure, Edith and Gertrude serve to inject some light relief into this increasingly grim tale, even as they locate the narrative precisely within its period. These elderly spinsters seem as delightfully sex-obsessed as the society they berate: “The great mammary age”, Gertrude calls it, and grumbles about “these continental films and striptease and endless petting ...” (ISS, 109). Into this conversation, as if on cue, steps a paradigmatic example of ‘the great mammary age’: an independent, hedonistic young woman, the beautiful Araminta, daughter of Kate’s friend, Charles. In her career as fashion model, the gamine-like Araminta anticipates Jean Shrimpton, the iconic 1960s model. Pale, thin and ‘leggy’, Araminta possesses eyelids ‘too tired to lift up for long the weight of her lashes.’ (ISS, 111) Her provocative, flimsy clothes and sexualised form cause much consternation amongst her numerous onlookers. De Beauvoir writes that the purpose of woman’s fashion is ‘not to reveal her as an independent individual, but rather to offer her as prey to male desires; [...] the costume may disguise the body, deform it, or follow its curves; in any case it puts it on display.’<sup>46</sup> Thus Araminta is constituted as the ‘desired feminine’, man’s ‘other’– and desired she most certainly is, by every male who looks upon her.

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<sup>45</sup> Juliet Mitchell, *Women : The Longest Revolution : Essays on Feminism, Literature and Psychoanalysis* (London: Virago, 1984). p. 43.

<sup>46</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 543.

Araminta is at once a precursor of the youth culture that would flourish in the 1960s, and an ambiguous, mysterious composition, one who retains her mystery to the end. De Beauvoir considers such feminine mystery: 'What is she? Angel, demon, one inspired, an actress?'.<sup>47</sup> Sexually-liberated young women like Araminta appear in 1960s fiction without genealogy, for example Muriel Spark's Selena Redwood in *The Girls of Slender Means* (1963).<sup>48</sup> Strangely non-human, otherworldly, Araminta is little more than a mannequin, a living doll, suggested both by her textual role as model and by her almost entire lack of interiority. Indeed, in an ironic exchange concerning her name the text underscores Araminta's 'unreality':

"I think my mother got it from a novel she was reading when she was expecting."

"I've never read a novel with anyone in it called Araminta."

"Neither have I. And I wouldn't either." (ISS, 159)<sup>49</sup>

Frequent references are made to parts of her body being icy cold, as if she were truly bloodless. And like a doll, she is always fresh and bright, never tired. Only when engaged in her twin obsessions, clothes and food, does she become fully alive. Indeed, her greedy desire for food is almost lustful: "I eat like a horse" (ISS, 111), she observes unselfconsciously, while remaining peculiarly thin. Primarily Araminta is animated as a sexualised female body whose very existence is predicated on being observed for men's pleasure. Yet behind her eroticised form and its clothing, there is a peculiar absence. Unrestrained in her speech and entirely self-absorbed, she talks in mixed

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. pp. 287-289.

<sup>48</sup> Other examples include A S Byatt's Anna in *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964), Margaret Drabble's Clara in *Jerusalem the Golden* (1965) and Edna O'Brien's Kate and Baba in *The Country Girls* (1960).

<sup>49</sup> Taylor may be alluding to Minta Doyle from Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*.

company of trips to the lavatory (ISS, 123), of having 'scurf' (ISS, 129) and shaving her armpits (ISS,124). In many ways she is the embodiment of de Beauvoir's 'girl child' who 'is taught that to please she must try to please, she must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a live doll'.<sup>50</sup> Observes de Beauvoir, it 'is understandable that the care of her physical appearance should become for the young girl a real obsession; [...] they must always be pretty in order to obtain love and happiness'.<sup>51</sup>

Yet even as Araminta is constituted primarily as the passive desired 'other', she is simultaneously an active self-determining subject with agency. De Beauvoir observes this contradiction in woman: man 'wants woman to be object: she *makes* herself object; at the very moment that she does that, she is exercising a free activity'.<sup>52</sup> If redolent of an automaton programmed afresh each day, Araminta is herself the programmer. It is she who creates herself as desired 'other', painting her face into a doll-like mask, thrilled by her own invention – at once narcissistic dressmaker and dummy, subject and object, sexualised yet curiously sexless (ISS, 122-123, 177). When Kate's son, Tom, is eventually permitted to make love to Araminta's body, he cannot engage her feelings. The following day the process of seduction must begin anew: 'at the next meeting, as at every meeting, [Tom] would be faced with her chilling friendliness as if nothing at all had happened' (ISS, 190). It is the same 'chilling friendliness' she bestows upon men viewing her modelling sessions. Clearly, in her construction of Araminta Taylor complicates de

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<sup>50</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 308.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.* p. 319.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* p. 626.

Beauvoir's depiction of the girl child, and it is this that invites the reader to rethink the figure of Araminta. Ultimately she is a subversive character, more subject than 'other'. Behind the 'girl child' is de Beauvoir's 'emancipated woman', who 'wants to be active, a taker, and refuses the passivity man means to impose on her.'<sup>53</sup> Paradoxically, it is Araminta's self-presentation as 'object' that ultimately empowers her.

Increasingly the text encourages us to view Araminta as Kate's double, her alter ego, a pairing signalled by locating Araminta's and Tom's lovemaking scene in the exact spot amongst the eggshell fragments of Kate's and Charles's earlier picnic.<sup>54</sup> (As a metaphor for the fragility of the novel's relationships, crushed eggshells is entirely fitting.) We can observe the mirroring of the two women in the narrative's excessive preoccupation with their hair: both are described as having inappropriately elaborate styles, both change their hair colour. Further, each is continually in the spotlight, endlessly observed. And while the desiring feminine is initially constituted as the polar opposite of the desired, the two creations are not as antithetical as they might seem. In a text that explores female embodiment – what it feels like to inhabit a woman's body – the intense physicality of the two women and the centrality of their bodies as both burden and delight are foregrounded. Indeed, the paired constructs might be construed as two halves of a whole, a reconstituted feminine, one exhibiting de Beauvoir's notion of 'possibilities', desiring and desired, subject and 'other', predator and

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p. 727.

<sup>54</sup> Neil Reeve points out this pairing of scenes in Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 62.

prey. And yet, before we are allowed to celebrate this fusion of a modern woman, she is destroyed.

Peppering the text are references to the key players being observed by 'a watchful audience', 'a chorus' – representatives of the prevailing socio-cultural landscape. Such observers, who had anticipated only disaster ahead, are not disappointed. In a somewhat clichéd dénouement, Araminta and Dermot are killed in a car crash while travelling together, suggesting an illicit liaison. As Liddell reflects in a letter to Taylor, Araminta is 'the sort of girl made to die in a motor accident (with another woman's husband)'.<sup>55</sup> Thus, as summer slips into autumn, Kate loses the object of her desire and her alter ego, the desired object; both the desiring and the desired feminine are revealed as untenable. The text invites the reader to conclude that society has not reached the point where it can countenance explicit sexual desire in the older woman, nor accept a reversal of roles within marriage.<sup>56</sup> Nor has the moment arrived for de Beauvoir's 'modern woman', a 1960s free spirit who seeks to control rather than be controlled by the male. We might conclude that the text is reflecting 1950s society in punishing Kate and Araminta for wanting more.

This circular novel now turns back to a life before Dermot, providing Kate with a more suitable husband, a duplicate of her first. Charles is exactly the traditional, dull, 1950s middle-class husband she had lost and, like her first,

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<sup>55</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 92. F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* provides a similar dénouement.

<sup>56</sup> Terrence Rattigan's 1952 play, *The Deep Blue Sea* reaches much the same pessimistic conclusion.



is sure to offer her comfort, if not bliss. Within the unreconciled Cartesian dualism staged by the novel, the text ultimately privileges mind over body, a harmonious life over the intense physicality of desire. In a final scene, ends are neatly if not entirely convincingly tied. The narrative closes with an absurdly short chapter that suggests Taylor might have lost interest in her characters, as she had once before. When in 1953 *The New Yorker* editor, Bill Maxwell, had suggested that *Hester Lilly* had ended too abruptly, Taylor had replied: 'I had really only wanted to describe the dissolution of love & was not much interested in what happened to Hester.'<sup>57</sup> Leaping a year, the narrative depicts Charles and Kate on their wedding day. Symbolically the season is again autumn, the weather drizzly, and Kate's hair restored to its original, middle-aged grey – just the sort of 'happily-ever-after' dénouement a reader of conventional domestic fiction might anticipate. This, however, is not conventional domestic fiction, and the optimistic ending is unpersuasive, for the text clearly signals Kate's future to be a return to the role of bored, unfulfilled housewife, aptly described by de Beauvoir:

for a great many women the day passes in much the same fashion. The husband leaves in the morning and the wife is glad to hear the door close behind him. She is free; the children go to school; she is alone; she attends to a thousand small tasks; her hands are busy, but her mind is empty; what plans she has are for the family; she lives only for them; it relieves her ennui when they return.<sup>58</sup>

And Kate is not alone in facing yet another disappointing life. A discourse on the unsatisfactory nature of woman's lived experience weaves through the

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<sup>57</sup> Letter from Bill Maxwell to Elizabeth Taylor, 3 March 1953. Taylor Papers. Accessed May 2011.

<sup>58</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. pp. 493-494.

novel, articulated by a largely sympathetic narrative voice. From the first page we learn that Kate's wealthy mother-in-law, Edwina, spends mornings in bed: 'How otherwise get through the triviality of the day?', muses Kate caustically (ISS, 9). Edwina's life is passed paying others to maintain her home and her person in immaculate condition. Reserving her most severe criticism for such women, de Beauvoir comments, 'a woman whose work is done by servants has no grip on the world; she lives in dreams and abstractions, in a vacuum.'<sup>59</sup> At the other end of the social scale, Mrs Meacock, Kate's cook, fares little better, pondering the future with unease: 'To stay in this house for years and years [...] would kill her spirit'. (ISS, 151) Seeking 'ways of escape from her prison' (ISS, 102), she compiles endlessly, and evermore pointlessly, her anthology of 'Five Thousand and One Witty and Humorous Sayings' – an updated version of a gentlewoman's time-passing preoccupation with her embroidery. Though Mrs Meacock has paid work, it offers only repetition and routine.

It is, however, Kate, the moral centre of the novel, whom Taylor allows to articulate most explicitly the emptiness, the smallness, of women's repetitive lives, filled, as de Beauvoir reflects, with passive lingering in the present, and in so doing reaches back to her first heroine, Julia in *At Mrs Lippincote's*, who suffers a similar existential crisis. Observing women 'who had rushed out in the middle of peeling potatoes' to meet their husbands, Kate wonders, 'Was it what life should be? [...] It seemed so very little'. (ISS, 21) The curate explains away Kate's dissatisfaction in terms of empty-nest syndrome,

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p. 638.

but the text is making a more fundamental point: children alone cannot provide life's meaning. Kate's sense of futility goes deeper: "We're all of us just passing time" [...] It seemed to her that it was worse for herself, without religion, to be squandering her life, expecting no other and chilled by the passage of time.' (ISS, 141) With her first husband, who spent many evenings dozing, Kate had experienced the same sense of restlessness and boredom (ISS, 35). Indeed, de Beauvoir's account of the confining life of a typical middle-class married couple might have been written by Taylor: 'The evening is dull: reading, radio, desultory talks; each remains alone under cover of this intimacy'.<sup>60</sup> De Beauvoir, of course, has little positive to say about the married state and woman's situation within it; it seems *In a Summer Season* shares this view.

It is this theme of woman's situation within marriage that Friedan addresses in *The Feminine Mystique*, seeking to dispel the myth of the 'happy housewife'.<sup>61</sup> Friedan is credited by many with having instigated the American women's movement, and in 1975 she explained how influential *The Second Sex* had been to the development of her feminist ideas: reading it in the 1950s 'led me to whatever original analysis of women's existence I have been able to contribute to the Women's movement and to its unique politics'.<sup>62</sup> Friedan terms the sense of futility experienced by married women in the 1950s, the 'problem that has no name', but is essentially 'the fact that

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p. 494.

<sup>61</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965). p. 30.

<sup>62</sup> In "Sex, Society and the Female Dilemma. A Dialogue between Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan", *Saturday Review* (14 June 1975), p. 16, quoted in Elizabeth Fallaize, ed. *Simone De Beauvoir : A Critical Reader* (London ; New York: Routledge,1998). p. 9.

American women are kept from growing to their full human capacities'.<sup>63</sup> In the late 1950s Friedan surveyed 200 women, who despite living the 'American dream', spoke repeatedly of the emptiness of their lives; life as suburban housewife and mother was simply insufficiently rewarding. Friedan's women were generally university-educated, and had been told to make a 'career' of cooking, housework, good works and motherhood. While Taylor's women have much in common with Friedan's, they are even less occupied, since their domestic help leaves them with more unproductive free time. Nevertheless, they too are living the dream, albeit a less-consumerist English version; they too are experiencing 'the feminine mystique', which states 'that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfilment of their own femininity'.<sup>64</sup>

Women's dissatisfaction, according to Friedan, stems from wanting more. The 'new image this mystique gives to American women is the old image: "Occupation: housewife".<sup>65</sup> 'The feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity. It suggests they can answer the question "Who am I?" by saying "Tom's wife ... Mary's mother".<sup>66</sup> Taylor's women, like Friedan's, desire more, even if unable to articulate that desire. A third husband will not offer Kate more possibilities, will not enable her to develop her own meaningful life. While she may have a 'meeting of minds' with Charles, she is destined to re-inhabit the traditional gender stereotype. As de Beauvoir writes, the 'tragedy of marriage is [...]

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<sup>63</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. p. 318.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* p. 63.

that it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine.<sup>67</sup> Monotony and futility are to be Kate's future, unrelieved in all probability by the sexual satisfaction her younger husband supplied. Even as the text articulates two unconventional feminine constructs that seek to destabilise a society shaped by man in his own interest, the experiments are shown to fail, and positive alternatives are not offered. While successfully articulating the problem of women's invidious position at mid-century, Taylor is unable to solve it. We must enter the 1960s, and Taylor's next novel, *The Soul of Kindness*, to encounter a more 'feminist' version of the feminine.

### ***The Soul of Kindness***

Published in 1964, *The Soul of Kindness* is Taylor's first truly 1960s novel, and yet the middle-class world imagined within it continues to look back to the 1940s and 1950s: men are charged with the important task of running industry and country, while women languish in low-status occupations or remain at home ably supported by cooks and housekeepers. Only the artist-figure dares to be different. As with so much of Taylor's fiction, the novel is a study in loneliness and desolation and the various strategies employed to avert life's bleakness. In 1962 Taylor went with Ivy Compton-Burnett to see Beckett's *Happy Days*, finding it deeply moving. She writes to Liddell: 'It is really devastating, and as much as one can bear – a middle-aged woman's gallantry (I see so much of it) signifying the human tragedy – the terrifying

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<sup>67</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 496.

attempts at optimism and the Molly Bloom nostalgia'.<sup>68</sup> Taylor began *The Soul of Kindness* soon after, and as Neil Reeve notes, it is 'interesting that the novel [...] should be filled to overflowing' with characters facing lives of loneliness and despair.<sup>69</sup> Dedicated to Bowen, *The Soul of Kindness* receives from her its greatest praise: 'immense writer-sisterly *pride* in your power, your style [...] This is SO GOOD. It's a masterpiece'.<sup>70</sup> Such praise owes more to friendship, perhaps, than to the excellence of the novel since this is not Taylor's finest work, even if Liddell designates it 'one of her best novels'.<sup>71</sup> Bowen has been described by Maud Ellmann as 'a notorious soft touch as a reviewer'.<sup>72</sup> In its depiction of the heroine, Flora, and her nemesis, Liz, the novel seems to lack the lightness of touch and the needle-sharp irony of earlier texts. These qualities Taylor reserves for the more nuanced minor figures who encircle Flora's world. As Reeve suggests, Flora's character 'is strongly if rather programmatically drawn'.<sup>73</sup>

As with *In a Summer Season*, my concern is with how Taylor writes the feminine: whether the text can be said to confront or problematise prevailing societal norms. This I explore by spotlighting two versions of the feminine articulated in the novel: the 'infantilised feminine', in the form of Flora, and the 'creative feminine', in the shape of artist, Liz. Again, my reading is inflected by de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. What I demonstrate is that, while both constructs of the feminine endure, the infantilised feminine's

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<sup>68</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 96.

<sup>69</sup> Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 64.

<sup>70</sup> Bowen to Taylor, 28 June 1964, Taylor Papers, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 350.

<sup>71</sup> Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p.102.

<sup>72</sup> Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen : The Shadow across the Page*. p. 196.

<sup>73</sup> Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. 65.

position becomes increasingly precarious, wholly dependent for survival on the continuing indulgence of Flora's 'others'. The creative feminine alone is seen to pursue the life de Beauvoir advocates for women – a life of possibilities and transcendence – but her freedom is gained at the expense of marriage and motherhood. The many minor female characters portrayed are offered no such liberty, condemned to lives of immanence, a state only the childlike Flora can relish.

If Flora is at the heart of this novel, it is a near empty heart. Unusually for Taylor, focalization is through the many minor characters who encircle Flora and only rarely through Flora herself. More often, she is the object of the novel's gaze. Flora alone believes herself to be the eponymous 'soul of kindness'; the reader will not long share this opinion. Indeed, a contemporary review in *The Times* considered her 'as dangerous as a packet of dynamite.'<sup>74</sup> In the main, the narrative voice reserves its sympathy for those who are the object of her 'kindness'. The deftly-crafted opening paragraph prefigures all that is to come:

Towards the end of the bridegroom's speech, the bride turned aside and began to throw crumbs of wedding cake through an opening in the marquee to the doves outside. She did so with gentle absorption, and more doves came down from their wooden house above the stables. Although she had caused a little rustle of amusement among the guests, she did not know it: her husband was embarrassed by her behaviour and thought it early in their married life to be so; but she did not know that either. (TSK, 7)

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<sup>74</sup> *The Times*, Issue 56125, 24 September 1964. p. 15.

Just as the text offers an ostensibly idyllic scene of a wedding breakfast so it exposes the turbulence beneath the surface calm. We understand from the narrator's ironic intervention that the bride is a 'gentle' creature who, even on her wedding day, is more interested in pleasing her doves than her new husband. Tellingly, it is the symbol of her marriage she cheerfully feeds to her birds. That she is both self-absorbed and self-willed is plainly signposted. Equally plain are her husband's early misgivings concerning their future, a theme pursued throughout the narrative. The dove motif continues: in a textual allusion to a picturesque tableau in Henry Green's *Loving*, which itself invokes Disney's 1937 *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Flora is photographed with a dove perched on her finger tip.<sup>75</sup> And in case the reader fails to grasp the significance, Flora's friend Meg comments: "It's a symbol, isn't it? [...] Bride and doves [...] It should be the best photograph of all. Except that there's no bridegroom." (TSK, 10) Notably, it is Flora and the bird that complete the picture – there is neither place nor need for a husband.

In *Flora*, Taylor animates an emblematic version of de Beauvoir's girl child. Tall, blond, beautiful Flora, termed 'lovely' three times on the first page, has been worshipped and indulged her entire life. 'Flora-worship', her husband privately terms it, subject to increasingly treacherous thoughts (TSK, 50). Constantly referred to as a 'child' or 'little girl', Flora is also 'vague', 'placid' and 'complacent' – all qualities applicable to de Beauvoir's girl child. As de Beauvoir writes, 'she is allowed to cling to her mother's skirts [...] She wears

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<sup>75</sup> Green, *Loving ; Living ; Party Going*. p. 203.



sweet little dresses, her tears and caprices are viewed indulgently'.<sup>76</sup> We are offered numerous images of Flora, a grown woman, cast in childlike situations: curled asleep in bed; sitting on the floor in her nightgown surrounded by torn Christmas wrappings, and being smartened up 'as if she were a doll'. (TSK, 115) 'In this world, uncertain and unpredictable as the universe of Kafka, one stumbles at every step. That is why many children are afraid of growing up', argues de Beauvoir.<sup>77</sup> To compensate her for her lack of phallus, observes de Beauvoir, she is given a doll:

on the one hand, the doll represents the whole body, and, on the other, it is a passive object. On this account the little girl will be led to identify her whole person and to regard this as an inert given object. While the boy seeks himself in his penis as an autonomous subject, the little girl cuddles her doll and dresses her up as she dreams of being cuddled and dressed up herself; inversely she thinks of herself as a marvellous doll.<sup>78</sup>

Thus, the passivity that is a feature of the feminine is established in childhood, not through biological difference but psychic-societal experience. As with Araminta, Flora understands 'that to please she must try to please, she must make herself object'.<sup>79</sup> Unlike the earlier incarnation, however, this child refuses to grow up, remaining determinedly innocent because from her doll-like dependent status she has much to gain, even after bearing her own live doll. De Beauvoir writes: 'This childish drama haunts the love of many women; they are happy to be called "my little girl, my dear child"', so as to replicate and retain the adult protection they experienced as children.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 298.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* p. 298.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* p. 306.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* p. 308.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* p. 655.

Flora, like Araminta, is at once subject and 'other': as subject she contrives to be kept in her position as object, as 'other'. In this manner the infantilised feminine retains agency, wielding power over others. Paradoxically, however, Flora is no waif-like, delicate creature requiring physical protection; she is described as tall and strong, more suited to horse-riding than ballet (TSK, 136). Even so, where Araminta seeks independence and freedom, Flora seeks the opposite, savouring her state of immanence, revelling in the restricted life and belittling treatment of the girl child so disparaged by de Beauvoir. Existing in a dolls' house environment of her own construction, she is utterly self-absorbed, never bored, never dissatisfied. In Flora there is no notion of a woman 'becoming', no hint of development or growth; her fidelity to the role of infantilised feminine creates a grotesque reality in 1960s society.<sup>81</sup>

All who live in Flora's sphere of influence are quietly required to maintain her in a state of innocence and happiness. Malleable she is not, her father-in-law soon discovers. On a rare occasion that her wishes are thwarted, she wails: "It would please *me*. And if I were in their place, I'd do anything rather than spoil my happiness." (TSK, 119) Her belief in her own goodness is unshakeable, and largely erroneous. According to her mother, Flora 'had always meant well. That intention had been seen clearly behind some of her biggest mistakes.' (TSK, 15) Equally unshakeable is Flora's childlike belief in the goodness of others: 'Her mother had encouraged only the prettiest view of human nature and no later aspects she may have come across seemed to

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<sup>81</sup> Again, 'society' follows de Beauvoir's usage.

have made an impression.’ (TSK, 37) Anything that falls outside Flora’s worldview is dismissed as fallacious. As with Araminta, there is something otherworldly about Flora, more beautiful artefact than living woman, underlined by husband Richard’s strange comment: ‘we’ve preserved the face pretty well between us [...] The face is his responsibility now and it would surely be his fault if it were altered, if the Botticelli calm were broken’ (TSK, 71-72). The repetition of the impersonal ‘*the face*’ reinforces the notion of Flora as non-human – a figure in a painting or a statue. Just as Araminta is sexually attractive but strangely asexual, so too Flora. Each offers herself for sex, bestowing herself as a gift (TSK, 30). And after four years of marriage both Richard and Flora are bewildered by her pregnancy, as if the idea of this doll-like creature producing a real baby is unimaginable.

References to goddesses recur in the text. In Roman mythology ‘Flora’ was the goddess of flowers and spring, and the fictive Flora is variously compared to Persephone, Demeter and Venus: ‘she had the aqueous beauty of Venus risen from the sea’ (TSK, 163). Botticelli’s ‘The Birth of Venus’ and the ‘Primavera’ are plainly suggested.<sup>82</sup> The metaphor of Flora as goddess, however, seems somewhat laboured; an equally viable metaphor is the figure of the dove, Flora’s favourite bird and a leitmotif in the text. Flora as dove is beautiful, strong and tame, living a sheltered, protected life within her dovecote, fed, nurtured and adored by all, only rarely leaving the safety of her home. In classical mythology the dove was a symbol of peace and love, and closely associated with both Aphrodite and Venus. There is, however,

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<sup>82</sup> For a discussion of the artistic allusions in the novel, see Crompton, “All Done by Mirrors: Reflectivity in the Novels of Elizabeth Taylor (1912-75)”.

an irony in this figurative use of the dove, since Flora's impact on the narrative is anything but peaceful.

If Flora is a dove then her nemesis, Liz, is a hawk, a wild free bird, wholly self-sufficient, surviving by its own efforts. Only Liz dares to penetrate Flora's steely complacency. The antithesis of Flora, Liz, the creative feminine, challenges the period's stereotypes of appropriate womanhood. Yet the narrator delights in creating evermore distasteful images of both Liz's physical self and her lifestyle, to the point of caricature. The bohemian Liz is 'a fattish, short young woman with untidy hair' (TSK, 41), 'short, fat legs' and 'yellow and bony' heels (TSK, 80, 42); she is 'coarse', dresses atrociously, eats heartily and lives in squalor. Having no one but herself on whom to depend, she is entirely self-sufficient. Liz is no man's 'other'; instead, she is the subject of her own life, a woman with agency. Unselfconscious and uncompromising, Liz is indifferent to the external dailiness of life, reserving all her energies and critical attention for her internal artistic life. Painting is her obsession, and paradoxically out of life's detritus – 'skeletons of dead flowers and cow parsley, peacock's feathers [...] a tangle of honesty, some large shells' (TSK, 42) – she composes pictures of delicate beauty.

In her construction of the creative feminine, Taylor is imagining a fictive version of de Beauvoir's creative artist. 'Woman's situation inclines her to seek salvation in literature and art', de Beauvoir writes.<sup>83</sup> She is, however, critical of women who choose the creative arts as a form of escape, those

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<sup>83</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 713.

who 'toy with arts and letters', producing inauthentic 'fancy work'.<sup>84</sup> The creative artist must strive for truth, and art must be an end in itself, providing its own reward – a circumstance more likely where a woman must live by her art, argues de Beauvoir. Liz is plainly such a woman. Unlike her fellow female characters, Liz has freedom, which according to de Beauvoir is essential: 'Art, literature, philosophy, are attempts to found the world anew on a human liberty: that of the individual creator; to entertain such a pretension, one must first unequivocally assume the status of a being that has liberty.'<sup>85</sup> She adds that 'bad luck or unattractiveness are often blessings in disguise.'<sup>86</sup> Though seemingly callous, de Beauvoir is suggesting that a woman's lack of appeal allows her to concentrate on her creativity without the distraction of marriage; within marriage, de Beauvoir contends, a woman is rarely sufficiently free to practise art with the necessary single-mindedness. Her example is Van Gogh who could not have lived and painted as he did had he been a woman.<sup>87</sup> Only when a woman gains her liberty, 'will she be able to seek in her life and her works to reveal the whole of reality and not merely her personal self. As long as she still has to struggle to become a human being, she cannot become a creator.'<sup>88</sup>

In Liz, Taylor has fictionalised a version of de Beauvoir's 'being that has liberty', while simultaneously invoking Woolf's creative artist who requires for artistic and intellectual freedom the symbolic 'room of one's own' and 'five

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p. 715.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p. 720.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p. 721.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p. 722.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid. p. 723.

hundred a year'.<sup>89</sup> Taylor thus draws a line between de Beauvoir's late modernist feminism and the modernist feminism of Woolf. Liz is a woman with 'possibilities'<sup>90</sup> who has eschewed a life of immanence for one of transcendence – the polar opposite of Flora. Just once they pass each other in the street: the lofty, well-groomed Flora observes 'a short, ungainly young woman with straggly hair' (TSK, 201). The disparity between the two is stark: where Flora sees ugliness, Liz finds beauty; where Flora envelops herself in a soft unreality, Liz fearlessly pursues the real; where Flora chooses infantilism, Liz chooses adulthood. What they share is a tight control over their lived experiences. Yet for a brief moment Liz has the power to undermine Flora's world, to force truth into her unreal universe: she alone confronts Flora's misplaced obsession with doing good while actually causing considerable harm.

All who enter Flora's infantilised sphere must play their part in protecting her from life's unpleasantness. "Someone always has to look after Flora, and let her think she's looking after them", comments her friend, Ba (TSK, 163). Worshipping at Flora's shrine, however, is demanding work, resulting in ill health for many of her followers – 'flu, stomach pains, depression, a cancer scare, all feature. Echoing an earlier Taylor heroine, Angel, Flora basks in an implacable yet erroneous belief in her own goodness, and the plot reads like a catalogue of errors. As with Austen's misguided matchmaker Emma, Flora continually meddles in the lives of others. First she attempts to effect a romance between her friends, Meg and Patrick, refusing to recognise

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<sup>89</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. p. 105.

<sup>90</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 66.

Patrick's homosexuality. Then she persuades her father-in-law, Percy, and his mistress, Ba, to marry despite their contented unmarried relationship; the resulting union is a far less successful arrangement. Flora's cook, Mrs Lodge, loathes London and is desperate to return to the country, but Flora employs both her charms and tears to retain her; the novel's final sentence suggests that Flora will succeed: 'It seemed to be quite forgotten that [Mrs Lodge] was ever leaving.' (TSK, 219) It is, however, Flora's treatment of Meg's brother, Kit, her principal acolyte, that brings the plot to its climax. A would-be actor whom all but Flora recognise as wholly without talent, Kit is no match for Flora's self-deluded interfering. By continually encouraging him to pursue an acting future, she pushes him to the brink of suicide.

Patrick's is a voice of reason in the text, expressing the disloyal thoughts Richard can only internalise. When Meg comments "Poor Flora", Patrick replies: "No one less so." (TSK, 77) Yet only Liz, motivated by a mixture of contempt and jealousy, forces Flora via an anonymous letter to face her part in Kit's suicide attempt. For a brief moment Flora's world is shaken. "It was as if she had woken from a happy dream into a nightmarish reality", observes Richard (TSK, 210). But the girl child could not survive in this new adult world; as Patrick observes, the "letter gave her a glimpse of herself as someone she could never bear to live with." (TSK, 215) Predictably, her followers soon rally to dispel the nightmare, and reinstate the dream. The novel ends with Flora once more the untroubled girl child, a conflation of subject and 'other' once more: "We're making plans about Christmas", she

says (TSK, 219). Unlike her fellow meddler, Emma, who learns from her mistakes, Flora refuses every opportunity to change and mature.

From the opening chapter it is clear that the narrator's frustrated sympathies lie with the lost and lonely women who populate the novel. These figures are dramatisations of de Beauvoir's unfulfilled women: the single women working in unchallenging and monotonous occupations, the married ones with no occupation at all. While the male, Richard, divides his time purposefully between running his business and worshipping his child-wife, the women suffer – from the waste and decay of their aimless lives. For these women, there is no escape from waiting in the present. Elinor, enduring a tired marriage to a physically and emotionally absent MP, exemplifies the emptiness of a middle-class married woman's existence, echoing Kate's situation in the previous novel. An intelligent childless woman, Elinor had tried and failed to enact Friedan's mythical 'happy housewife' role: 'Uneasily she had sat in coffee shops in the middle of shopping mornings, trying to join in, to talk of children's illnesses and cooking and the charitable works in which they all seemed so severely involved.' (TSK, 155) For a time she and Richard enjoy each other's company, sharing adult conversation, but such a relationship has no future: Richard must return to Flora.

The unmarried Meg manages no better: she sees her future reflected in the depressing image of a middle-aged colleague; more than a page of prose is devoted to Meg's existential fears: 'it would be like Miss Williams at the office, who lived with her invalid mother and never went on a holiday or had



an adventure. The books she read were sillier and sillier as the years went by – for reality had become upsetting, the truth disturbing.’ (TSK, 75) Reminiscent of Camilla in *A Wreath of Roses*, Meg is destined to pass her life unmarried and poor, languishing in the kind of semi-skilled occupation reserved largely for women. Her impossible love for a gay man only underlines the hopelessness of her condition. Other female characters’ situations are equally unpromising: Flora’s mother leads a life of waiting for her daughter to visit while secretly terrified she has a terminal illness; her housekeeper is reduced to writing love letters to herself. Lacking fulfilling lives, these women exist in quiet desperation, lingering without possibility, the ‘others’ of a society dominated by male norms. Only Flora and her antagonist Liz escape – Flora because she insists on her twin positions of subject and ‘other’, and Liz because she refuses to be ‘other’.

Yet as the opening scene foreshadows, Flora’s future may fall short of the fairytale existence envisioned; Richard’s misgivings about his infantilised wife infect the novel. In keeping secret his evenings with Elinor, he cannot acknowledge even to himself, his real reasons: ‘He knew how easily wounded Flora could be. That must have been the reason for his secretiveness. He could really think of no other.’ (TSK, 167) The pleasures of such a wife are surely limited; other Elinors may populate his future. Further, there is a suggestion that their daughter, a genuine infant, may come to replace Flora in his affections. Just as Richard was excluded from the dove photograph at the start of the novel, Flora is excluded from his imaginings of life with his teenage daughter, Alice: ‘They were always out

together, people noticed. Flora wasn't there in any of these pictures.' (TSK, 116) Notably, Alice is 'the spitting image of her Daddy' (TSK, 118) rather than a miniature replica of Flora. There is thus a suggestion that the infantilised feminine will die with Flora to be succeeded by Alice, whose future will be shaped by her father.

Liz's brief affair with Kit prompts a re-examination of her style of painting. For a moment she had allowed something beyond art to touch her emotions – whether love, anger or jealousy – and the result is transforming. The 'dusty débris' cluttering her home has served its inspirational purpose: 'There were enough shapes, patterns, colours in her head to last a lifetime, she believed. All day she had felt a sense of change' (TSK, 173). Where Frances in *A Wreath of Roses* effects a dramatic change in her creative aesthetic in response to the barbarity of war, Liz transforms her work as a result of her confused feelings for Kit. And like Frances, Liz no longer wants to charm: 'I want to shake them up [...] People under spells are half-dead.' (TSK, 186) The same images are captured, but now they are 'disorganised', 'subject to fission', delicate paintings of beauty no more. Her friend Patrick, like Frances' friend, Morland, cannot accompany her on her new visual journey. Liz, however, is consumed with ideas, still 'becoming': "I've a lifetime's work in my head." (TSK, 186)

Though fifteen years separate the two novels, *The Soul of Kindness* bends back to *A Wreath of Roses* in its depiction of the three key female characters. As we have seen, the artist-figure Liz is a reincarnation of

Frances, now a woman who can devote her life to art without first needing to squander her most productive years in the traditional feminine role of governess. Both Meg and Camilla are fated to pass her lives without fulfilment in stereotypical 'women's' occupations. Despite the years separating them, their single avenue of escape is still the traditional one of marriage, yet neither text offers any such destiny. And while the character Liz, the young mother-figure in *A Wreath of Roses*, has little in common with Flora, they share the situation of marriage and motherhood, and at the end of each novel neither yearns for a different future. Thus only the creative feminine has made progress towards female emancipation since the 1940s text.

In *The Soul of Kindness*, while both versions of the feminine are seen to survive, the position of the infantilised feminine is essentially unstable. Flora relies for her contented existence on the everlasting devotion of an army of worshippers. Her army, however, has shown itself capable of rebellion. The creative feminine alone is offered an independent life of liberty and fulfilment, but to achieve this, like Frances, she must sacrifice a great deal – not least personal relationships and financial security. Only extraordinary women with talent and an all-consuming passion would make such a sacrifice, and be given the opportunity. Ordinary women are shown to have no access to de Beauvoir's life of possibilities. As once again Taylor depicts the waste of ordinary women's lives, their existential despair, she proffers no alternative lifestyle, no independent fulfilled version of the feminine. The construct of

the 'ageing maternal feminine' I examine in Taylor's final 1960s novel fares little better.

### ***The Wedding Group***

As Taylor was writing her third 1960s novel, *The Wedding Group* (1968), a counterculture movement was gaining momentum, reaching its peak in 1968 with the political and social unrest that reverberated around much of the globe. Young people were reshaping the fashion and music industries, and the sexual revolution was underway, assisted both by access to more effective methods of birth control and by the legalisation of abortion. Protests against the Vietnam war, the nuclear bomb, racism, the treatment of women, and restrictions on free speech all reflected the widespread desire for socio-political change. And battle lines were drawn largely along the generational divide. *The Wedding Group* is not entirely immune from this climate of rebelliousness: it offers a commentary on changing times in its depiction of unrest within the community of Quayne, not least the disjunction between the needs and wants of the different generations.<sup>91</sup> Yet even as the novel speaks to its time, in its depiction of the 'ageing maternal feminine' it looks back to an earlier era – once more both in and out of time.

Again, the key text against which I read Taylor's novel is de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. My final investigation centres on Midge, a blending of de Beauvoir's 'maternal' and 'ageing' feminine constructs – what I term the

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<sup>91</sup> Given her friendship with Elizabeth Bowen it seems possible that in calling the community Quayne, Taylor is paying homage to Bowen's *The Death of the Heart* and its protagonist, Portia Quayne.

'ageing maternal feminine'. I argue that Taylor's dramatisation of this construct demonstrates evermore clearly the existential desperation experienced by women leading unfulfilled, wasted lives, and in this case the extreme measures an ageing lonely woman will employ to forestall such a fate. What Taylor does not do, even in the late 1960s, is construct a version of the ageing feminine living a life of 'possibilities'.<sup>92</sup> It would seem that women like the middle-class Midge, born in the Edwardian era, were fitted solely for a life of domesticity, supported emotionally and financially by a husband.

The Quayne community is emblematic of a monstrous form of masculine despotism, despite being 'mostly a world of women.' (TWG, 3) That it is dominated by a man, the 'painter and pronouncer', Harry Bretton, becomes clear when we learn that his wife is 'usually hidden behind an enormous tureen' at the dining table, the tureen symbolising her feminine role as provider of food (TWG, 3).<sup>93</sup> Indeed, she is the archetypal nineteenth-century wife and mother whose life is dedicated to pleasing her husband. Harry, who specialises in painting biblical scenes in modern dress, is a caricature of a tyrannical patriarch, ruling Lear-like over his extended family as if by divine right – and the text is unflinching in its derisive and antipathetic portrayal of the character. In this spare novel, the narrative voice is more

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<sup>92</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 66.

<sup>93</sup> Beauman, among others, suggests that the sculptor, Eric Gill's house at Pigotts was the model for Quayne, and Gill himself the model for Harry Bretton. Taylor was a frequent visitor in the 1930s. Harry has been variously compared to Gill, Stanley Spencer and Holman Hunt. See for example, Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. pp. 40-42, and Crompton, "All Done by Mirrors: Reflectivity in the Novels of Elizabeth Taylor (1912-75)". Also, Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 110.

terse and acerbic, less kindly-disposed towards the shortcomings of its characters than we find in earlier texts.

Quayne is a community populated by a number of triads: Harry's three daughters, their three husbands and Harry's three granddaughters. All save one granddaughter, Cressy, accept with little complaint Harry's godlike power.<sup>94</sup> At one point Cressy likens Harry to a portrait of Christ painted by Harry himself, an association her self-loving grandfather would most certainly encourage, quietly delighted to be called 'The Master'. Feminism 'was to Harry an ungainly aberration. "What a lark!" he always said – that women should have a vote, above all want one. Then he would go on to tell them how to use it.' (TWG, 51) It is Cressy's short-lived rebellion that shapes the narrative: her escape from a controlling grandfather forms the first part of the narrative, and her entrapment by an even more controlling mother-in-law the second.

The other males of Quayne are of little consequence, all 'other' to Harry's subject, 'acquired' for Harry's daughters, we are told with a hint of irony, for their faith (Roman Catholic) and their complicity in maintaining Harry in his position of authority (TWG, 6). Harry and his enormous ego rule over a Spartan, timeless, hand-knitted, home-baked community, isolated from the world by its remote location along a furrowed track, separating the past from

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<sup>94</sup> With regard to the triad of granddaughters, Taylor may perhaps be alluding to Hecate, the triple deity of Greek mythology, called Phoebe or the moon in heaven, Diana or the earth, and Hecate or Proserpine in hell. These would correspond in the narrative to Mo the heavenly one who conforms most closely to Harry's wishes, Pet the earthly one who falls pregnant, and Cressy the hellish one who escapes into the outside world. See E. Cobham Brewer, *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*, first published 1870.

the present: ‘*Quayne only*’ was the signpost at the bottom of the hill’ (TWG, 10). Quayne, however, is destined to become a dead-end figuratively as well as literally; the old order is about to give way to the new. Meanwhile, Harry’s sanctimonious pronouncement on the complementary roles of men and women is a delightfully self-conscious parody of Victorian patriarchal ideology:

“In spite of all our grand ideas [...] we are only perverse children at heart. If we have the intellect, it’s our women who have the wisdom. [...] For all our precious ideals, our inventiveness, it’s the essential, instinctive mother-wife we crave at last. We return, after our escapades or great deeds, to her, for forgiveness and healing and approval.” (TWG, 48)

Harry’s speech encapsulates all that de Beauvoir wishes to expose when setting masculine transcendence against feminine immanence. As she argues, ‘Balzac illustrates this manoeuvre very well in counselling man to treat [woman] as a slave while persuading her that she is a queen.’<sup>95</sup> ‘He just makes me want to vomit’ is Cressy’s blunt response – and conceivably Taylor’s too (TWG, 49). Predictably it is the ‘instinctive mother-wives’ who do the child-rearing, food-growing, cooking, baking, cleaning, sewing and washing – freeing the men to be ‘inventive’. Cressy’s rejection of her designated role mirrors the turbulence in society generally, anticipating the end of the old regime. No longer a notorious painter, Harry’s ascendancy is almost over. His work is now praised by the very establishment he had always reviled, and worse it is ignored by the coming generation. Moreover, the space between his kingdom and the world beyond is fast disappearing:

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<sup>95</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 729.

Quayne's woods are being felled to accommodate modernity in the form of Regency-style houses; only Cressy sees them as at once an improvement and an opportunity. Echoing the sentiments expressed by the autocrat, Henry Wilcox of *Howard's End*, Harry resents this embodiment of so-called progress. Dictatorial to the end, he determines to transfer his commune to Suffolk: 'They would all receive instructions when the time was ripe.' (TWG, 187)

Owing something to Araminta, Cressy is a modern teenager whose time has at last arrived. Yearning for 1960s life – cheap shop-bought clothes, packaged food, Wimpy Bars and pop music – Cressy rejects the community, escaping Quayne in search of a different future from that prescribed for her. For a brief time she is the subject of her own life, moving to the local village,<sup>96</sup> bravely attempting to become an independent young woman, working in and living above an antique shop. Yet her bid for freedom is singularly short-lived: a naïve and lachrymose creature, she fails to survive in the wider world, opting instead to become 'other' once more by marrying a London journalist, David, a father-figure in his thirties. Thenceforth she sinks compliantly into a life of abject stagnation, never growing up, drifting into motherhood because she forgets to take her pill – a further example of de Beauvoir's girl child. It is David's mother, Midge, the ageing maternal feminine, who conspires to maintain Cressy in this infantilised state, for it is she with most to lose by Cressy's becoming an adult. Midge, like Harry an inauthentic character, is an egregious example of Taylor's ageing woman

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<sup>96</sup> In which lives a 'lady-novelist' who was 'of no account', writes Taylor wryly (TWG, 62).



without possibilities, mired in the present, living an unfulfilled life. Unlike earlier versions, however, the narrator offers her little sympathy until the final pages.

At once de Beauvoir's 'mother of a boy-child' and 'ageing woman', Midge is portrayed as despotic and manipulative, a gross distortion of the traditional 'angel in the house' figure of Victorian patriarchy. Having years before driven away her much-older husband (but, tellingly, not his financial support) with her cruel contempt and slovenly ways, Midge has reinvented herself as the ideal mother, thus ensuring her spoilt son, the bachelor David, has no cause to leave her. Notably, David's married brothers have been removed by their wives as far as possible from Midge's clutches. The mature mother, writes de Beauvoir, 'wants to feel that she is indispensable to her god.'<sup>97</sup> Dressed fashionably but perhaps a little vulgarly in 'pink velvet trousers', Midge creates a perfect home, prepares delicious meals and plays the attentive hostess to David's friends. Her aim is to be more wife than mother, concealing from her son all traces of the ageing process – because without him, she is nothing. As de Beauvoir comments on the ageing feminine and her grown son, she 'resumes towards him the seductive and ostentatious behaviour of the young girl [...] as she walks at his side, elegant, still attractive, she thinks she seems his elder sister'.<sup>98</sup>

As the mother of a boy-child, the 'mother's joy in him is one of generosity; she must find pleasure in serving, giving, making him happy [...] Like the

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<sup>97</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 599.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 596-597.

woman in love, the mother is delighted to feel herself necessary; her existence is satisfied by the wants she supplies', writes de Beauvoir.<sup>99</sup> And David accepts this situation since both have much to gain. Yet Midge's insistent form of motherhood tips over into de Beauvoir's version of masochistic devotion, in which 'the mother makes herself the slave of her offspring to compensate for the emptiness of her heart [...] she gives up all diversion, all personal life, thus assuming the role of victim; and she derives from these sacrifices the right to deny her child all independence.'<sup>100</sup> De Beauvoir writes of 'a tyrannical will to domination', of 'displays of resignation [that] give rise to guilt feelings in the child'.<sup>101</sup> Throughout the narrative Midge is depicted as a woman with neither friend nor occupation, living her vacuous life vicariously through her son, waiting for his return so that life can begin again, endlessly pacing her beautiful but 'dead' drawing-room, always clutching a drink.

As with Flora, Midge is both subject and 'other': as controlling subject she chooses to be 'other', victim even, to David's subject, ensuring he feels guilty about her, responsible for her. Thus David both benefits and suffers from her devotion. Feeling oppressed by Midge's obvious fear of being alone, he unconsciously downplays his experiences when apart from her: he 'was innocent of the workings of his own mind, and did not go into his motive for always [...] exaggerating the rain on holidays, the weariness of journeys' (TWG, 27). The duty towards his mother weighs heavily upon him: 'For the rest of her life, this responsibility, he was thinking.' (TWG, 97) However, just

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid. p. 528.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. pp. 529-530.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. pp. 529-530.

as Midge is beginning to believe they will remain a couple evermore – because ‘so many of his friends now were good sorts, plain girls with hearts of gold, on the shelf for all time, evidently’ (TWG, 21) – Cressy enters the scene. And a strange triangular relationship develops in which the generations become confused and David appears as both lover and father: ‘To David and Midge, having Cressy about was like having a marvellous child to care for’, comments the narrator (TWG, 99). Initially, far from feeling herself excluded, Midge gains from having another child to look after; indeed she and David share Cressy equally, and Cressy is entirely complicit in this arrangement. But when David decides to marry and leave home, Midge’s way of life is threatened: ‘his wife is going to deprive her of her functions’, states de Beauvoir.<sup>102</sup>

De Beauvoir shows compassion for the ageing feminine who gains her freedom ‘at the very time that she can make no use of it. [...] Towards fifty she is in full possession of her powers; [...] as for her, she is put into retirement. She has been taught only to devote herself to someone, and nobody wants her devotion any more.’<sup>103</sup> Midge, however, has no intention of relinquishing her power. To assuage his guilt at leaving home David is persuaded to buy a dismal cottage close to Midge’s house: “We cannot go very far away, for my mother’s sake. She will be quite alone when we go.” (TWG, 117) Thereafter Midge schemes to ensure that the cottage is so uncongenial that the couple, especially Cressy, spend most of their time with her. Seduced by Midge’s comfortable home and delicious food, Cressy falls

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid. 599.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. pp. 596-597.

under her spell, slipping into a state of apathy, growing fat and lazy on 'creamy sauces and brandied puddings'. (TWG, 133) The wicked witch-figure of the 'Hansel and Gretel' fairytale is plainly signalled.<sup>104</sup>

Cressy's plight is summarised by a minor character: "Cressy fought that battle with her grandfather, but this one she'll never fight. She doesn't even know there's a war." (TWG, 178) As David's and Cressy's marriage founders, it increasingly mirrors the failed one between his father and Midge. Theirs too was a marriage between an older man and a young woman, and the text prefigures trouble in this second marriage early on. David's father warns: "Don't you ever marry a woman so much younger than yourself. You'll only live to rue the day if you do." (TWG, 32) When to save their marriage, David and Cressy attempt to escape Midge's power by relocating to London, she stages a burglary, knowing that David's sense of guilt will wreck their plans. The set of *Look Back in Anger* is the model for their increasingly shabby cottage: 'Cressy's room was like a stage-set for some depressing play about young-married strife, the very background for bickering and disillusion. Napkins steamed round the fire; the ironing board was piled high with unironed clothes' (TWG, 198). Midge becomes indispensable in her ability to care for the child whom Cressy cannot manage. This, however, is revealed to be more than a cynical manoeuvre to keep the family close: in depicting Midge as truly loving the baby, the text permits her one fine instinct, allowing the reader finally to empathise with this otherwise monstrous figure. And, of course, the child offers her a new

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<sup>104</sup> Reeve refers to this fairytale in Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 69.

purpose in life. The turning-point comes, however, when David discovers the burglary to be a fake: 'he saw [Midge] in such a new light' (TWG, 227), gaining the courage to flee, finally choosing his child-wife over his mother-wife.

The dénouement sees the couple planning to transfer to London after all, removing the child from Midge's care. That the marriage is liable to fracture, however, is suggested in the fate of the 'The Wedding Group' figurine of the title. This ornament is compared to the couple's own bridal group photograph, briefly drawing together the text's two disparate families and underscoring the differences that separate past and present: 'Cressy and David in the middle, and Harry Bretton, for once in his life, standing to one side. Midge was dressed in a dark suit and a white fur cap; the other women wore tweed coats and sensible shoes' (TWG, 136). As the narrative reaches its close, the ornament is smashed, pointing to a number of potential break-ups within the group. The text offers little hope for the continuance of Harry's way of life: 'Perhaps it would see Harry out,' wondered Cressy, 'and then they would all drift apart, and live on God knew what.' (TWG, 222)

Midge's future is equally bleak. Reeve points to a grim scene in the narrative, witnessed first by David then Midge, who from their different perspectives are appalled by the miserable spectacle of an angry old woman being taken to the village pub by her family.<sup>105</sup> Midge recasts the scene with herself, David and Cressy in the roles: 'Poor old thing indeed. Growing deaf,

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid. pp. 71-72.

carted about for her treat and having it rubbed in all the time. No wonder she looks so furious. David shouting at *me* in a pub one day' (TWG, 72). At the same time there is little expectation that London life will reinvigorate David's and Cressy's marriage. It is hinted that he may return to his London mistress, Nell, leaving Cressy to cope with the baby, thus requiring Midge's help once more. The final near-tragic scene has Midge gazing adoringly at the sleeping child, the narrative voice at last slipping from detached censorship to compassion: 'She did not want to sleep herself; simply liked having him there with her. Her heart had grown large with love.' (TWG, 230) Yet while the novel concludes on this seemingly uplifting image, the moment is undermined by earlier scenes of Midge bending the poor child to her will, just as she had with David: 'She had a suspicion that he was naturally left-handed, and determined to put this right from the beginning.' (TWG, 215) We are told chillingly that Midge believed 'she would make something of him in time.' (TWG, 218) One can only fear for the child's future if he becomes her entire life's work.

As with many Taylor texts, the ending is ambiguous, and rereading is rewarded. Bowen reread the novel as soon as she had finished, writing to Taylor: 'And now having come to the last page I'm not sure that I shan't be starting over again. [...] though I speak of "the last page", the novel seems to have no arbitrary or snipped-off end. I mean, it continues.'<sup>106</sup> Taylor's staging of de Beauvoir's ageing maternal feminine dramatises once more the existential anguish experienced by women leading moribund lives, and

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<sup>106</sup> Bowen to Taylor, 3 May 1968. Taylor papers. Accessed 10 May 2011.

indeed, the extremes to which a woman might go to avoid such a fate. What the text does not do, even in the late-1960s, is animate a version of the ageing feminine living a transcendent existence. Women like Midge, born in the first decades of the twentieth century, were conditioned to expect a life of marriage and motherhood supported by a man, as were the educated middle-class women of that generation. Despite some transatlantic differences, *The Feminine Mystique* was far from simply an American experience. What the text does, however, is animate two minor female characters of the next generation who in their contrasting ways, gesture towards different futures for women; these are not unproblematic, however.

David's one-time mistress, Nell, is an independent woman with a career in journalism. Having little interest in home-making, she tells Midge, "I myself loathe cooking, [...] To me, it's like having a migraine." (TWG, 47) Throughout the narrative it is Nell, together with David's other friends, who recognise and correctly interpret Midge's behaviour; unlike Cressy, Nell would never accommodate Midge in her life. Yet while the text reveals her to be a clear-sighted woman with agency, it also makes her peculiarly unappealing. Indeed, her characterisation resonates with the physically unattractive Liz Corbett in *The Soul of Kindness*. Curiously, both are condemned for their 'fat legs'. Through her creative abilities, Liz is shown to be a woman with possibilities, yet as we have seen, it is at some personal cost. In *The Wedding Group*, more than once we see, focalized through Midge and David, Nell as a physically unsightly creature: 'she slumped and sprawled, her skirt caught up above her fat legs, showing stretched stocking-

tops, suspenders, edges of tatty lace.’ (TWG, 42) David compares her to ‘a cow getting up’ as she climbs a stile (TWG, 116). Clearly, the two novels refuse to give these emancipated feminine constructs any attractive qualities.

There is, however, one fictive female figure who is both liberated and attractive, and enjoying a satisfying family life. Yet she is a strange confection: Alexia is David’s friend and joint owner with her brother, Toby, of the antique shop in which Cressy works. Alexia and Toby have fulfilling lives, gaining considerable pleasure from searching out and selling antiques, and more importantly from their domestic arrangements. They dress alike and speak as one, continuing and finishing each other’s sentences. ‘They were a quiet pair, and self-contained, with a physical beauty which seemed the reason for their never separating, never being seen with inferior partners. [...] They looked like twins, but were not’ (TWG, 39). An androgynous couple, their co-dependency suggests they are simultaneously both subject and ‘other’, and the reader is invited to imagine their relationship to be incestuous. Indeed, at one point when David idly contemplates attempting to seduce Alexia, he thinks it ‘would be more wicked [...] than stealing another man’s wife.’ (TWG, 44) The image of their self-sufficient domestic life is one of intense satisfaction – all they ‘wanted and hoped for was to live their lives together, and in peace.’ (TWG, 67) This unconventional relationship seems distinctly more equal and harmonious than any conventional one found in Taylor’s oeuvre.



In her 1960s novels, Taylor animates four unmarried career women who, while appearing to lead more fulfilling lives, are in fact complex and contradictory creations. Two – the artist, Liz, and the journalist, Nell – are constructed as sexual beings yet oddly physically repulsive; and two – the model, Araminta, and the antique dealer, Alexia – are beautiful, attractive figures yet either asexual or androgynous. In the single state it would seem that sexuality is aligned with repulsiveness rather than beauty. In a Taylor text, a woman cannot ‘have it all’, whether married or not. If she chooses a creative, productive life of possibilities, she must forsake marriage and motherhood; if she follows the conventional route, she must reconcile herself to a life of immanence. Even when Taylor looks to a younger generation of women, their lives are rarely uncomplicatedly satisfying.

## **Conclusion**

In examining what it means to be a woman in Taylor’s 1960s novels, my aim has been to determine whether her fiction might be deemed feminist, and Taylor an early feminist writer. To be a woman in a Taylor text is essentially to be prosperous, white and middle-class, a housewife and mother located largely within the domestic – an evermore anachronistic figure as the decade progressed. Yet, as I have demonstrated, Taylor’s women are also of their time, in that they speak to their historical moment. In reading her 1960s fiction through the prism of de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, I have shown that both writers reach similar conclusions on women’s lived experience at mid-century: woman cannot thrive within a society formed by man to suit

man, where woman becomes man's 'other'. Having in common age, class and politics, Taylor and de Beauvoir shared a strong sense that women's situations, whether single or married, were deeply unsatisfactory. As discussed earlier, Taylor's first novel, *At Mrs Lippincote's*, animates as heroine a young mother who even then is filled with a profound sense of life's futility. Taylor was thus staging the lives of immanent women in the 1940s just as de Beauvoir was chronicling their lives in *The Second Sex*, and Taylor continues in similar vein throughout her writing career. Indeed, there is a sense in which her women are always looking back to the 1940s, stuck in time, unable to progress. The anger at woman's conflicted position that seeps through the textual interstices of Taylor's 1940s texts is, in the 1960s, inflected by a sense of frustration and impatience at those women who are entirely complicit in their immanence, and sympathy and sadness towards those who lack any choice.

In her portrayal of her various feminine constructs, Taylor clearly holds to the belief that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'. Yet they are strange distortions of de Beauvoir's models of womanhood, suggesting Taylor moves beyond merely dramatising de Beauvoir's accounts to critiquing women's lived experience at mid-century. Indeed, it is the complexity in Taylor's depiction of women that calls for her to be read differently – in a way that understands her fiction knowingly to challenge and disturb the society that produces such versions of the feminine. I would thus judge Taylor's 1960s novels feminist texts, and Taylor herself an early feminist. In animating women's lives, Taylor does what a writer of fiction can

do more effectively than a writer of fact: bring to life de Beauvoir's thesis, giving women both an interior and exterior voice. In so doing Taylor explicitly exposes the sheer waste and decay of so many women's lives, their despair, their sense of futility. Yet rarely do her texts articulate alternative lifestyles; in her own situation at mid-century she does not resolve the existential dilemma of their lived experience, nor offer a blueprint for a better future. Her political beliefs take her to the brink but no further. Born just after the Edwardian era into a lower-middle-class family, Taylor when young did not attend university and mix with educated women with different life experiences and expectations. Instead, she received an alternative form of education when her political, social and intellectual world centred on the Communist Party of the 1930s. But in opting for married life in the affluent Thames Valley, she chose to live amongst a very conservative set of people. And while Taylor was in many ways an outsider in this milieu, she looked to it for her intellectual and social life, and indeed for literary inspiration. Having settled for a 'quiet life', she would in her fifties be somewhat remote from the more liberated young woman of the 1960s.

De Beauvoir, however, has much to say on the subject of woman's emancipation, arguing that until women cease to be socially constructed to conform to masculine norms of femininity, they will not gain their freedom. She urges changes to the social structures that bind women to the domestic and restrict their liberty. In particular, women would benefit from engaging, like men, in free projects and activities, including challenging work beyond the home. Marriage as the sole destiny is damaging to both partners, she

maintains. Friedan reaches a similar conclusion in *The Feminine Mystique*. The key is education and a new life plan: 'with the vision to make a new life plan [...] she can fulfil a commitment to profession and politics, and to marriage and motherhood with equal seriousness.'<sup>107</sup>

'To face the problem is not to solve it', argues Friedan. 'But once a woman faces it, [...] she begins to find her own answers.'<sup>108</sup> In staging de Beauvoir's sex/gender dialectic, Taylor is clearly facing and indeed analysing the problem, but does not solve it, and nor do her own generation of women writers.<sup>109</sup> When de Beauvoir was asked in a 1965 interview why she had never fictionalised a liberated female character who exemplifies her thesis in *The Second Sex*, she replies: 'I've shown women as they are, as divided human beings, and not as they ought to be.'<sup>110</sup> Her collection of short stories, *The Woman Destroyed* (1967), illustrates this position perfectly, repeatedly presenting the middle-aged woman as victim, as 'other'.

Taylor was in feminist terms a transitional writer, and to encounter the emancipated woman in 1960s fiction, we must pursue the next generation of writers, those born in the 1930s and beyond. As de Beauvoir suggests, the

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<sup>107</sup> Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*. p. 329.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* p. 294.

<sup>109</sup> For example, the notion of woman as 'other' is not a major concern of either Muriel Spark or Iris Murdoch. Largely uninterested in the domestic, Spark writes few mothers and children into her fiction. And even as Murdoch's 1960s fictional women are situated ostensibly within the domestic, she is less concerned with the situation of women than with the human condition itself.

<sup>110</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, "The Art of Fiction No. 35", interviewed by Madeleine Gobeil, *The Paris Review*, Spring-Summer 1965, No. 34. <http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4444/the-art-of-fiction-no-35-simone-de-beauvoir>. Accessed May 2012.

'free woman is just being born.'<sup>111</sup> Rosalind Coward's observation on feminism resonates with the position of young women writers in the 1960s: 'Feminism could be called the daughters' revolt, so central has been the issue of women defining themselves against the previous generation and distancing themselves from their mothers.'<sup>112</sup> Whether or not they would consider themselves feminists, A S Byatt and Margaret Drabble, both university-educated, create intelligent educated middle-class young heroines whose lives are filled with possibilities. When writing their 1960s novels, these two sisters were still in their twenties with young families of their own, and the sexual revolution had hardly begun. In their fiction they engage with contemporary debates on women's freedom, sexuality and motherhood. In a 1991 introduction to her first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun* (1964), Byatt articulates the predicament faced by young educated women of the time, echoing the frustration Taylor expressed in a letter at the start of this chapter:

My problems were both human and literary. The human problems were to do with being an ambitious woman, in the English version of the world of Betty Freidan's feminine mystique. We wanted marriage and children, [...] and we were fatally torn, when thinking of our futures, by hopes of marriage, and hopes of something, some work, beyond getting to university at all. Men could have both, work and love, but it seemed that women couldn't.<sup>113</sup>

*The Shadow of the Sun* centres on the young protagonist, Anna, and her escape from the influence of a remote, erudite and successful father, reminiscent of both *Middlemarch's* Casaubon and *To The Lighthouse's* Mr

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<sup>111</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. p. 723.

<sup>112</sup> Rosalind Coward, *Our Treacherous Hearts: Why Women Let Men Get their Way* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), pp. 91-92, cited in Lorna Sage, *Angela Carter, Writers and Their Work* (Plymouth: Northcote House in association with The British Council, 1994). p. 7.

<sup>113</sup> A. S. Byatt, *The Shadow of the Sun* (London: Vintage, 1991). pp. viii-ix.

Ramsay. Within this world of male privilege and female sacrifice, Anna begins to discover her own identity, her own autonomous self, rejecting along the way the paradigm of womanhood exemplified by her mother, whose life of immanence and subjugation mirrors those of Taylor's generation of middle-aged women.

In her metafictional second novel, *The Game* (1967), Byatt explores the intense and ultimately destructive rivalry between two disparate yet closely entwined siblings, Julia and Cassandra. At the same time she examines fiction's part in highlighting woman's dilemma: Julia writes domestic fiction that foregrounds the stagnant lives of educated women, novels that Byatt herself would never write. Indeed, when Julia adopts a new approach, Byatt ventriloquises her thoughts through a reviewer: 'Julia Corbett has at last broken out of the suffocating domestic prison where she was strangled with her own waste fertility'.<sup>114</sup> Yet the text suggests that Julia's earlier novels satisfied a need in her intelligent women readers, by mirroring their own lives of boredom and waste.<sup>115</sup> Later Julia concludes that a 'novel ought, ideally, to balance in a perpetual juggling trick the sense of real limitation against a real awareness of human possibility.'<sup>116</sup> This, of course, is exactly what Byatt does in her 1960s fiction. The siblings' predicament is neither simply biological nor gendered: they are two uncompromising, entangled people searching for their identities via the reality/fiction dichotomy, and neither is subject to masculine domination.

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<sup>114</sup> A. S. Byatt, *The Game* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967). p. 264.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.* p. 139.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* p. 163.

Margaret Drabble is praised by Angus Wilson for 'her exact commentary on the great divide between the young woman as she has always been in English tradition and the new generationally organised society'.<sup>117</sup> In her early novels she too explores the lives of educated young women, albeit in a somewhat lighter style. Rosamund, the heroine of Drabble's 1965 novel, *The Millstone*, is a wealthy young woman living alone in her parents' flat while completing her doctoral thesis. Becoming pregnant, she decides to forge a life as a single parent. Scorning the conventional male-dominated lives of women of her mother's generation, Rosamund is confident she can 'have it all', and indeed she does, obtaining an academic position on completion of her thesis despite single motherhood – an unlikely outcome in the mid-1960s, certainly for any young woman without Rosamund's financial and intellectual resources. Nonetheless, Rosamund is de Beauvoir's and Friedan's fulfilled, transcendent woman with possibilities, though it is notable she chooses to remain unmarried. In *Jerusalem the Golden* (1967),<sup>118</sup> the young protagonist Clara escapes to London from a bleak, lower-middle-class family in the north of England to attend university and train to be a teacher. There she falls in love with the members of a wealthy, bohemian close-knit family who offer her everything she has always wanted. By the close of the novel, Clara is emerging from her grim past into a life of de Beauvoir's liberty and 'becoming'.<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Angus Wilson, *The Observer*, 28 April 1968.

<sup>118</sup> Margaret Drabble, *Jerusalem the Golden. A Novel* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967).

<sup>119</sup> Angela Carter, though born in 1940, could never be considered a literary 'daughter' of Taylor, and thus is beyond the scope of this study. Carter's fiction, very much part of 1960s counterculture, almost defies categorisation in its blend of magic realism, surrealism, fantasy, gothic, feminism and postmodernism. While Carter's novels seemingly have little to say regarding the social construction of gender, Lorna Sage maintains she was writing very much in the tradition of de Beauvoir: 'The affinities between Carter and Beauvoir are less

De Beauvoir's emphasis on woman's need to access the same kinds of projects as man positions her in the tradition of second-wave feminism, even as she initially rejected the label of feminist. Indeed, *The Second Sex* is considered by many to be the first second-wave feminist work. Running alongside its polemic on women's liberty is a discourse on the existentialist notion that each woman (and man) should be able to define herself on her own terms and assume the individual responsibility that accompanies liberty. This necessitates being attentive to the situated individual struggling within the uncertainty of existence, something Taylor grapples with repeatedly in her fiction. That Taylor's 1960s fiction speaks directly to de Beauvoir's text has been clearly demonstrated. I therefore wish to claim Taylor's 1960s fiction as standing on the cusp of second-wave feminism. Further, I want to recognise Taylor as an early feminist writer who, because of her own situation, could not see clearly over its threshold to articulate in her fiction the life of the free woman. By the time Taylor comes to publish her next novel, *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont*, she is approaching sixty. While never abandoning the plight of immanent women, this novel and her last, *Blaming*, centre primarily on the theme of ageing and dying, one close to Taylor's heart as she struggles with her own ill health and mortality.

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obvious than they might be because Carter in her fiction adopted the old magical motifs and turned them on their heads carnival-style, rather than abusing them and banishing them as did Beauvoir.' Lorna Sage, *Moments of Truth : Twelve Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001). p.164.



## Chapter 5: Death's Waiting Room

### Introduction

No one could reach her, she knew, and in that knowledge lay all her helplessness and terror. She was slipping out of their reach into total darkness, as once her husband had slipped away from her. Fold his hands tightly in hers as she might, none the less the ties had loosened and he had gone swimming away from her out of her life [...] her religion had always been a matter of words, of catchy phrases, and now she had not the strength to form a word or put together a phrase for her own consolation. There was only this strange feeling of floating left to her, her hand something people took up and touched to try to give comfort. But no matter what they did they could not penetrate to the small clot of fear which was the only reality now. All else had gone [...] nothing remained but the little centre of fear in her amorphous body, floating on its bed, without weight, without pain, without anchorage. (AVH, 281-282)

Mrs Bracey's deathbed scene in *A View of the Harbour*, one of very few in Taylor's oeuvre, foregrounds the essential isolation of every human being as she crosses from life to death.<sup>1</sup> The journey is clearly a frightening and friendless one, and religion no 'consolation'. The language of horror saturates Mrs Bracey's thoughts: 'helplessness and terror', 'total darkness', 'clot of fear', 'little centre of fear'. Mind and body have no further use for each other as the ethereal body floats off anchorless, disconnected from the internal voice, fear the only reality. In drawing attention to the physicality of death, the passage resonates with Beckett's work, not least the first text of *Texts for Nothing* (1954), which drags the dying body into consciousness: 'I say to the body, Up with you now, and I can feel it struggling, [...] till it gives

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<sup>1</sup> A further deathbed scene occurs at the end of *Angel*. Taylor, *Angel*. pp. 248-249.

up. I say to the head, Leave it alone, stay quiet, it stops breathing, then pants on worse than ever [...] it's truly all one to me.'<sup>2</sup> But where Beckett animates a mind resigned to its final destiny, Taylor sees the process of dying as mental anguish. This chapter argues that Taylor's preoccupation with death and dying allows her to probe the isolation and fear that prowl between the fissures of existence.

Death is paradoxical: it is present yet absent in life, belonging yet not belonging, an extreme example of an ambivalent anachorism. To Arnold van Gennep, it is the final rite of passage, one that divides being from non-being, life from any afterlife.<sup>3</sup> Death haunts Taylor's every novel, not least her final two, *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* (1971) and *Blaming* (1976), completed as she herself was facing death. As an atheist, her concern was less with metaphysical questions of a Christian afterlife, than with the effect of death and dying on the living – the aftershocks of death's exploding bomb. The chapter investigates this disquieting subject both thematically – how and why Taylor writes death and dying; and structurally – death in the sense of the novelistic ending. Both the ambiguity of her fictive endings and their intrinsic circularity are examined for their contribution to the reading experience. It is Taylor's concern with time that takes centre-stage in the chapter, most particularly in *Mrs Palfrey*. Seemingly locked in time, the narrative tends towards a kind of 'achronism', timelessness. Time thickens, becomes glutinous, is prone to moving backwards and in circles.

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<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, Beckett Short (London: John Calder, 1999). "Text 1", p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. p 21.

In his essay 'Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel', Bakhtin characterises time in the domestic fiction of writers such as Flaubert in similar terms. He writes of 'cyclical everyday time' that has 'no advancing historical movement', time that is 'viscous' and 'sticky' and 'drags itself slowly through space'. Novelists, he argues, use such time as a background onto which they paint 'temporal sequences that are more charged with energy and event.'<sup>4</sup> In *Mrs Palfrey*, however, the background and foreground are one – there are no energetic events, only repetitive sticky time. These ideas of repetition and return circle back to Chapter 2 where the concept of the return was examined alongside Bowen's essay, 'The Bend Back'.

Peter Brooks argues in his essay, 'Freud's Masterplot', that repetition in literature allows the reader to make connections between past and present, and to imagine a future.<sup>5</sup> 'Repetition', he writes, 'is a *return* in the text, a doubling back.'<sup>6</sup> Brooks' essay interprets Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as a 'dynamic-energetic model of narrative plot' that understands repetition, the need to repeat, as a primitive instinct separate from the pleasure principle.<sup>7</sup> My analysis of the repetition and return within Taylor's late novels is inflected by these texts by Brooks and Freud, together with a third: Frank Kermode's 1967 work, *The Sense of an Ending*, in particular his discussion on the human need for beginnings, middles and ends, which he compares to realist fiction's linear plot – as he puts it, *tock* following *tick*.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." pp. 247-248.

<sup>5</sup> Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot." pp. 287-288.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p. 288.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 296.

<sup>8</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending : Studies in the Theory of Fiction : With a New Epilogue*. p. 45.

Central to my analysis is Taylor's disordering of this temporal linearity: her texts suggest that, in a century steeped in war and fear of war, life can never again be linear and uncomplicated; in neither fact nor fiction can *tock* follow *tick* in any simplistic manner.

Viewed through the lens of my second framing concept, the key characters in *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* and *Blaming* are shown to be at once spatially and existentially anachoristic; they have lost their sense of place in the world. Ultimately they *have* no place. In different ways the novels speak to Beckett's 'blankly aporetic line': 'I can't go on, I'll go on.'<sup>9</sup> This sense of what Peter Boxall terms Beckett's poetics of 'persistence' and 'exhaustion' characterises the lives of Mrs Palfrey and her fellow residents at the Claremont: the sense of being at once unable and able to continue.<sup>10</sup> Located in the anachronistic world of something resembling an Edwardian home for gentlefolk, *Mrs Palfrey's* deracinated residents, a dying breed, are ensnared in a near-timeless present, condemned to a life of repetition until death. Equally ensnared in time and place is the writer-figure, Martha, in *Blaming*. When no longer able to envisage futures for her fictive creations, she ceases to be able to envisage her own: crippled by loneliness and the death of hope, Martha's inability to span the vertiginous canyon between Beckett's two sentences culminates in her suicide.

By the 1970s, Taylor's novels share with their characters this mood of persistence and exhaustion, a 'tired horror'. They orientate backwards less

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<sup>9</sup> Boxall, *Since Beckett : Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism*. p. 1. *The Unnamable*, in Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies and the Unnamable : Three Novels*. p. 418.

<sup>10</sup> Boxall, *Since Beckett : Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism*. p. 1.

for reasons of nostalgia, than because they are unable to look forwards. As argued in the previous chapter, Taylor was a transitional writer who at this stage in her life was unable to take the novel forwards, or perhaps no longer interested in doing so.<sup>11</sup> Her later novels, then, become fixed in time and place, both in terms of content and form. Repetition and return are their only possibilities. Yet once more we find between the covers of Taylor's seemingly conventional fiction contemporary intellectual preoccupations that might confound expectation, in this case a discourse on the nature of life and death that engages with the solipsism of Beckett and the works of Freud – once again Taylor examines the scalpel within the kid glove. While her fiction is at once sharp and amusing, its unexpected strangeness draws the reader's attention to life's darker side.

With two world wars and the seemingly endless Cold War,<sup>12</sup> the twentieth century was haunted by violence and death, and so too Taylor's literary imagination. According to Freud, it is 'impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. [...] in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality.'<sup>13</sup> Literature allows us to experience death vicariously in the safety of the fictive form, assuming the role of reader/spectator. As Freud writes, in 'the realm of fiction we find the plurality of lives which we

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<sup>11</sup> When asked in a 1965 interview whether she had been influenced by 'the school of anti-novelists – Alain Robbe Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute', Taylor replied: "I can't be, I haven't read any of them." Eric Phillips, "Elizabeth Taylor: Novelist and Short Story Writer," *The Writer* (October 1965). p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> A phrase coined by George Orwell. In the *Observer* of 10 March 1946, Orwell wrote that '[a]fter the Moscow conference last December, Russia began to make a 'cold war' on Britain and the British Empire.' He had earlier used the phrase in his essay, 'You and the Atomic Bomb', in *Tribune*, 19 October 1945.

<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Our Attitude towards Death", Vol. 14. (1914-1916). Freud et al., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. p. 289.

need. We die with the hero with whom we have identified ourselves; yet we survive him, and are ready to die again just as safely with another hero.<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin also suggests we turn to fiction for a knowledge of death refused us in life. The reader seeks characters 'from whom he derives the "meaning of life" therefore he must [...] know in advance that he will share their experience of death: if need be their figurative death – the end of the novel – but preferably their actual one [...] What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.'<sup>15</sup> The reader's shivering life is surely warmed by Taylor's fiction, for, from first to last death's darkness stains her novels.

At the beginning of the twentieth century many people still held to the Victorian belief in an afterlife. According to Van Gennep, the 'most widespread idea is that of a world analogous to ours, but more pleasant'.<sup>16</sup> After the apocalyptic events of the century, however, and certainly by the late 1960s when Taylor was reaching the end of her writing life, fewer people believed in an eternal life, forcing them to face mortality more directly and thus fear it more. As Elizabeth Kübler-Ross observed in the 1970s, the 'belief has long died that suffering here on earth will be rewarded in heaven'.<sup>17</sup> There is, unsurprisingly, no transcendent element to be found within Taylor's oeuvre, no question of life beyond death. It is the human condition, one that must inevitably include death, that plainly fascinates her. In fiction death can be both structural and thematic: it can occur before a

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 291.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations; Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968). p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. p. 152.

<sup>17</sup> Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying* (London: Tavistock, 1973). p. 13.

narrative begins, a device designed to shape what follows (as in Taylor's *Palladian* and *The Sleeping Beauty*); it can occur offstage (*Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* and *Blaming*, for example); or centre-stage (as in *Angel* and *A View of the Harbour*). If in life death can seem arbitrary and senseless, in fiction it should have meaning, and it is the meaning of death in Taylor's late fiction that I explore in this last chapter. As Garrett Stewart observes, all 'that narrative can ever promise [...] is that fiction, though not necessarily any of its characters, will be able to make something of death, take from it a revelation vouchsafed only because it can be safely outlasted, lived through in reading.'<sup>18</sup>

My contention is that the fear of death that characterised the traumatic first half of the century and persisted during the Cold War is played out in Taylor's novels; and they never quite escape the sense of despair that Taylor articulated in her 1940s texts. As noted in Chapter 2, after the Spanish Civil War, she observed that she could never again 'take such an emotional interest in a war [...] Only cold dread'.<sup>19</sup> It is the cold dread that lingers. Reflecting on atrocities committed in countries such as Bosnia and Rwanda, Samuel Weber observes in 1997: 'The last decade [...] has reminded us of something that psychoanalysis should have made it more difficult to forget: that the past is never simply dead and gone but also, *in potentia* at least, the future.'<sup>20</sup> While explicit references to national and international politics are rare in Taylor's work, their effects, namely the terrible things people do to

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<sup>18</sup> Garrett Stewart, *Death Sentences : Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984). p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> Taylor to William Maxwell, mid-June 1951, *The New Yorker Papers*, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 89.

<sup>20</sup> Weber, "Wartime." p. 85.

each other, continue to cast a shadow. And the anger that leaches through the pages of her first novel continues to the last. Death provides a locus from which Taylor can delve between the cracks of middle-class, home counties domesticity to mine both the strangeness and the depths of fear, loneliness and isolation that swirl there.

'Like history,' observes Alan Friedman, 'death is narrative as well as event: a process created, ordered, and performed by survivors, or sometimes non-survivors.'<sup>21</sup> Society must construct death, it must find a way to represent what is in the final analysis a lack. In the nineteenth century death held little mystery: occurring largely in the domestic, deathbed scenes were part of daily life. The literature of the period mirrored this Victorian paradigm of death, an obvious example being the fiction of Dickens. Yet in the twentieth century, the Victorian teleology of death was undermined, both as a consequence of war and a decline in a belief in the afterlife.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, death largely quit the home, shifting to battlefield or hospital. If death was now final, and no longer a transition to a better world, its rituals had to change. And literature, seeking to make sense of this revision of death and the dying process, had to change also. In Taylor's novel, *Palladian*, death becomes a series of 'recurring brackets': "It goes on and on, a sort of nagging parenthesis, coming in brackets at the end of everything that happens ..." [Cassandra] fancied she saw her life spread out in handwriting

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<sup>21</sup> Alan Warren Friedman, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion on the shift in Western society's approach to death, see "The Pornography of Death", in Geoffrey Gorer, *Death, Grief, and Mourning in Contemporary Britain* (London: Cresset Press, 1965). pp. 169-175.



on a page and again and again in the recurring brackets 'My father having died.'" (PAL, 93)

For the living, the death of a loved one just 'goes on and on', in endless repetition. And in *Mrs Palfrey* and *Blaming*, death's waiting room is filled with repetitions, returns and oscillations, linear time is collapsed. Discussing Scheherazade's persistent storytelling in *Thousand and One Nights*, Friedman suggests that '[e]very story continued far enough ends in death; yet every recounting suspends finality.'<sup>23</sup> The story at once implies and denies death, thus the telling of death prolongs the story and resists the final end. Both *Mrs Palfrey* and *Blaming* conclude in inexorable death prefigured early in the texts, but delayed by Taylor's storytelling. While both novels reflect realist fiction's teleological plot structure – Kermode's *tick-tock* – the thickening of time, the many returns and repetitions, slow the narrative drive, delaying death – *tick-tick* and *tock-tick*. 'Repetition', argues Brooks, 'appears to suspend temporal process, or rather, to subject it to an indeterminate shuttling or oscillation which binds different moments together as a middle which might turn forward or back.'<sup>24</sup> Taylor's novels become stuck in this spatial and temporal middle, able to turn back but rarely forwards.

The fear of death and dying that is an insistent theme of Taylor's late novels can be traced in part to the tense mood prevailing during the nuclear age of the 1950s and '60s. Looking back in 1999 on the original text of his 1967

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<sup>23</sup> Friedman, *Fictional Death and the Modernist Enterprise*. p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot." p. 288.

book, *A Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode reflects on the political landscape of the mid-1960s with its sense of impending disaster:

no one could ignore the imminence of events that could without too much exaggeration be characterized as apocalyptic. The Cuban missile crisis and the assassination of President Kennedy were quite recent events, the Cold War remained very cold [...] The war in Vietnam was rapidly escalating. [...] It seemed more than merely possible that there was a bad time coming, possibly a terminally bad time.<sup>25</sup>

Even as a cataclysmic nuclear war was somehow averted, the Cold War remained icy cold until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. On the domestic front, it prolonged in modified form a number of political imperatives common during the Second World War: a state of anxiety and uncertainty, secrecy, conspiracy, spying and surveillance, state control and propaganda. Taylor's engagement with the political never left her.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, explicit references to the atomic bomb occur in two of her novels from the 1950s and '60s. At the end of *The Sleeping Beauty*, when Vinny reveals that his marriage to Emily is bigamous, she comments: "It will be forever like living at the edge of a volcano." "Our lives are that nowadays, no matter how we behave", replies Vinny (TSB, 247). While Emily dismisses this Cold War reference, 'living at the edge of a volcano' was exactly the political situation in the early 1950s. A decade later, an elderly figure in *The Soul of Kindness* rails against the youth culture and their fear of the bomb: 'It unsettled them, it

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<sup>25</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending : Studies in the Theory of Fiction : With a New Epilogue*. pp. 181-182.

<sup>26</sup> For example, she refused for political reasons to return to her beloved Greece after the military coup of 1967. Indeed, she was blacklisted as a result of an interview she gave condemning the coup. Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 108.

was said. They talked about it all the time. They feared it. But what about us, me? [...] The bomb won't just drop on the teenagers.' (TSK, 144)

As Peter Hennessy reflects, it 'is the Cold War which gives the UK of the late forties, the fifties and the sixties one of its most special flavours and distinguishes it from what came after'.<sup>27</sup> British and indeed American fiction of the mid-century was not untainted by this 'special flavour'. In his 2009 book, *The Literary Cold War*, Adam Piette investigates the cultural and psychological effect of the Cold War on the literary imagination of writers as diverse as Vladimir Nabokov and Ted Hughes.<sup>28</sup> He includes novelists such as Graham Greene and John Le Carré who confected espionage thrillers that were explicitly informed both by the machinations of the Cold War and by their own experiences within British Intelligence – works such as Greene's *The Third Man* (1949), *The Quiet American* (1955) and *The Human Factor* (1978), and Le Carré's George Smiley spy novels, first published in 1961. Of greater relevance to Taylor's domestic fiction, however, are the domestically-oriented novels of writers such as Muriel Spark and Elizabeth Bowen, works that approach the Cold War in a more nuanced way – Spark's *Memento Mori* (1959) and Bowen's *The Little Girls* (1964), for example.<sup>29</sup>

*The Little Girls* is a novel steeped in domestic rather than political espionage; an undercurrent of menace runs through it that disturbs both characters and their possessions. Piette writes of the text's 'anti-nuclear troping' and argues

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Hennessy, *The Secret State : Preparing for the Worst*, 2nd ed. (London: Penguin, 2010). p. xxix.

<sup>28</sup> Piette, *The Literary Cold War : 1945 to Vietnam*.

<sup>29</sup> Muriel Spark, *Memento Mori*, New ed. (London: Virago, 2010); Elizabeth Bowen, *The Little Girls* (London: Penguin, 1982).

that 'the role of the novel [...] is to display the symptoms of the Cold War imaginary.'<sup>30</sup> It begins with Dinah's scheme to entomb 'expressive objects' for posterity in a cave in her garden – to be discovered after a nuclear catastrophe perhaps. This project is a re-enactment of one she and her friends had undertaken when children fifty years earlier: they had buried a coffer containing precious objects in their school grounds. Tellingly, the school had been bombed during the Second World War and when the box is finally unearthed fifty years on, it is empty. The objects of the past are plainly ephemeral. Dinah's desire to repeat the experiment is something of an obsession and while it appears harmless, 'it soon takes on the darkening shadow of physical destruction cast by both world wars and the nuclear age that followed', observes Elizabeth Inglesby.<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, Piette could not include every work that tropes the Cold War; that he omits Spark's *Memento Mori*, however, seems surprising. While the novel's primary theme is the process of ageing and death amongst a collection of disparate elderly characters, it is also concerned with the Cold War, as Rod Mengham argues in a 2007 essay.<sup>32</sup> The catalyst for the novel's action is a series of anonymous telephone calls made to the assorted characters, all bearing the message: '*Remember you must die*'. The effort to discover the identity of the caller(s) is the narrative's driving force. As Mengham observes, the Cold War was a time when 'the most significant memento mori

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<sup>30</sup> Piette, *The Literary Cold War : 1945 to Vietnam*. p. 212, 211.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth C Inglesby, "'Expressive Objects': Elizabeth Bowen's Narrative Materializes," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 53, no. 2 (Summer 2007). p. 322.

<sup>32</sup> Rod Mengham, "The Cold War Way of Death: Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*," in *British Fiction after Modernism*, eds. Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

of all was the threat of a nuclear strike, of a death for which there is no adequate means of preparation, or any time in which to do the preparing.<sup>33</sup> The telephone calls, like the threat of nuclear war, provoke a fear of death and destruction that suffuses the text. As Kübler-Ross commented at the height of the Cold War, death 'is still a fearful, frightening happening, and the fear of death is a universal fear'.<sup>34</sup> Symptoms of the Cold War fill the text: spying and espionage, blackmail, power shifts and conspiracies. And just as the intelligence world was shrouded in secrecy, so too the narrative's anonymous caller: his identity is never revealed. Mengham concludes that *Memento Mori* 'is a novel about the Cold War way of death.'<sup>35</sup> The age of its characters, he observes, means they have experienced all kinds of deaths, not least those resulting from two world wars. 'Old age is a universal condition, but the sense of an ending which governs these characters' lives is highly specific', he argues.<sup>36</sup> *Memento Mori* clearly resonates with Taylor's *Mrs Palfrey*, not least in its setting and the universal anxiety and fear that permeate both texts.

It has become commonplace to assign the adjective 'bleak' to Taylor's fiction, but her final novels are unquestionably her bleakest, altogether sadder in tone than earlier work, even if lightened by instances of her customary humour. At first reading the many connections between Taylor's last two novels may be overlooked, yet both have ageing protagonists with near-nothing to do, de Beauvoir's women lingering in the present, occupied in

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p. 160.

<sup>34</sup> Kübler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*. p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> Mengham, "The Cold War Way of Death: Muriel Spark's *Memento Mori*." p. 164.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p. 164.

endless and frequently pointless repetitious diversions. Beckett's protagonists in *Waiting for Godot* are suggested, a work whose central preoccupation is surely 'waiting' and not 'Godot'. Writer-figures feature in both *Mrs Palfrey* and *Blaming*, allowing each to engage self-reflexively with the process of writing; and both texts reveal the permeability of the fiction/reality border. What we find in these two novels is that, as the key characters linger in death's anteroom, Taylor critiques in a more profound manner than in earlier novels, the ineluctable loneliness and isolation that is the destiny of every individual approaching this final unknown and unknowable place.

A fitting end to this concluding chapter of my thesis is an exploration of one further aspect of the endings and death trope: the fictional conclusions to Taylor's novels. Inevitably this will circle us back to beginnings, since beginnings and endings appear inexorably coupled. As Brooks observes, it 'is the role of fictional plots to impose an end which yet suggests a return, a new beginning: a rereading. A narrative, that is, wants at its end to refer us back to its middle, to the web of the text: to recapture us in its doomed energies.'<sup>37</sup> He cites in support of his argument the various returns Pip makes in the plot of *Great Expectations*, but he might have referenced the 'doomed energies' of *Blaming*, given the number of returns Martha makes as she repeatedly visits Amy's house, returns to America, and finally turns back to England and death. It is, however, the structural rather than thematic significance of fictional endings that I foreground: the effect of the ending on

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<sup>37</sup> Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot." p. 297.

the reader. More than once I have alluded to the circularity or ambiguity of Taylor's fictive endings, and it is these aspects I pursue more systematically here, attempting to discover why Taylor might so consistently employ these literary devices. But first I return to the rituals, repetitions and returns in *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont*.

### ***Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont*<sup>38</sup>**

Written at the end of the 1960s, Taylor's tragicomedy *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* is the most theatrical of her novels, presenting a small cast of elderly characters in various stages of decrepitude, whose interactions occur chiefly on a single stage-set, the eponymous Claremont, an unfashionable, anonymous South Kensington hotel.<sup>39</sup> Despite the residents' declaration that London was chosen for their last 'home' over quiet seaside resorts because there 'was always so much going on in London' (MPC, 8), or because we 'like to be where something's going on' (MPC, 121), this is either self-delusion or an initial optimism that quickly fades. In fact, for the ageing inhabitants life *is* the Claremont, and it might be located in any 1960s urban landscape. Moreover, life within this old-fashioned hotel would have changed little in decades. Death is an unwavering absent presence; when

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<sup>38</sup> According to Beauman, Taylor may have been influenced by Dorothy Whipple's short story entitled 'Last Laugh', set in a London hotel called the Claremont and populated by a similar set of elderly residents. Beauman published the story in *The Persephone Biannually*, no. 10, (Autumn/Winter 2011-12): 16-19. She notes, however, that the story is part of Dorothy Whipple's estate and may never have been published.

<sup>39</sup> *Mrs Palfrey* was made into a *Play for Today* on television in 1973, and a 2005 film starring Joan Plowright. When researching the novel, Taylor spent time in a Kensington Hotel eavesdropping on conversations in the dining room. Her grandson, Matthew, tells how Taylor received considerable attention from waiters who thought her note-taking indicated her role as a food critic. Matthew was in the audience when David Baddiel was in conversation with James Naughtie, *The Book Programme*, BBC Radio 4, broadcast 1 July 2012.

the residents eventually depart it is for nursing home or hospital – a last move before death. The Claremont can only ever be death's waiting room since, as Mrs Palfrey soon learns, "we aren't allowed to die here." (MPC, 36) Her resolve is to remain for as long as practicable, thence to 'be taken to hospital and hope to die as soon as possible' (MPC, 20). It is not death itself she fears, but the fear, common amongst the residents, of falling ill at any moment and being required to leave the comparative freedom of the Claremont for a severely restricted life in a nursing home – or worse. This fear of worse-to-come haunts their daily lives and might be compared to the Cold War fear of the ticking nuclear bomb that could be launched with little warning. In this sense, as well as in setting, the novel echoes Spark's, *Memento Mori*.

Taylor's grimly unsentimental text is a study in boredom, despair, anxiety and uncertainty. Above all, it harbours an underlying dread that time may simply cease to pass, that the day may never end. In this quality of time's thickening we find something of what Boxall refers to as Beckett's blend of persistence and exhaustion: the existential belief that life is essentially just being and going on. And of course one of the few certainties within its world of uncertainty is death. To stave off the inevitable and to consume the time until death arrives, its characters engage in endless repetitions, returns and rituals, enlivened by the occasional diversion, just as the grimness of the text is enlivened by flashes of humour. One such exemplifies Taylor's delight in the slightly vulgar: "Well, another Sunday nearly gone," Mrs Post said quickly to cover a little fart. She had presence of mind.' (MPC, 52) When



the frailest member is removed unwillingly to a home, a resident comments: “They will let her die there: as she deteriorates, they will not be bothered to get her out of the bed.” (MPC, 106) Mrs Palfrey’s response is: ‘Must keep going, she thought, as she so often thought.’ (MPC, 108) Not just the sentiment expressed but the rhythm and repetition within this sentence seems to speak to the persistence and exhaustion in Beckett’s works. As Kingsley Amis observes, ‘the funny and the appalling lie side by side in close amity.’<sup>40</sup>

In a letter to Taylor praising *Mrs Palfrey*, Bowen writes: “‘In my end is my beginning’ is truest of any great novel, I think – therefore in the second reading there is an additional meaning from the first page on.’<sup>41</sup> If this is true – and it is something I address below – Mrs Palfrey’s die is cast from the opening sentence: ‘Mrs Palfrey first came to the Claremont Hotel on a Sunday afternoon in January. Rain had closed over London’ (MPC, 1). The cold misery of January rain and the tedium of a lugubrious Sunday afternoon, and this is a novel teeming with lugubrious Sunday afternoons, establish the mood of the novel, one inflected by a deep sense of fear – of the unknown, of the streets, of sliding into despair, and ultimately of dying. ‘She tried to banish terror from her heart. She was alarmed at the threat of her own depression.’ (MPC, 1) The narrator writes of the ‘frightening road’, and of Mrs Palfrey ‘almost dreading to read the name Claremont’ (MPC, 1), and later her heart ‘staggered in appalled despair’ (MPC, 4). Unable any longer to manage alone and neither wishing nor invited to live with her daughter, the

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<sup>40</sup> Kingsley Amis, “How to Behave”, *New Statesman*, 27 August 1971, p. 275.

<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth Bowen to Taylor, 13 September 1971, Taylor Papers. Accessed 10 May 2011.

recently widowed Mrs Palfrey must take her place amongst similarly displaced guests sharing reduced lives in the alien space of the Claremont.

But, like Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days*, Mrs Palfrey is a survivor, and just as Winnie is sustained by the contents of her handbag, so Mrs Palfrey is comforted by the few familiar items that have travelled with her: her bottle of pills and 'short fur cape'. She 'was a tall woman with big bones and a noble face, dark eyebrows and a neatly folded jowl. She would have made a distinguished-looking man and, sometimes, wearing evening dress, looked like some famous general in drag.'<sup>42</sup> (MPC, 2) In conjuring the image of a general, Taylor is emphasising Mrs Palfrey's qualities of fortitude and determination, ones she would have acquired during her time in the Far East as a colonial administrator's wife. Yet these qualities are in danger of deserting her when first shown her room at the hotel: 'she thought that prisoners must feel as she did now, the first time they are left in their cell, first turning to the window, then facing about to stare at the closed door: after that, counting the paces from wall to wall.' (MPC, 3) This passage serves as a metaphor for the narrative as a whole. Life has become a prison cell; indeed, at one point an unsympathetic visitor questions whether the Claremont is either a prison or a lunatic asylum (MPC, 119). When the residents look in one direction, their future is a closed door; if they look back they can see through a window to their pasts. Their present, however, comprises the few paces they can shuffle back and forth in endless boring repetition, trapped in the middle between the beginning and end.

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<sup>42</sup> Originally Taylor's 'famous general' had been Lord Louis Mountbatten until advised by her publisher to make the change for fear of giving offence. See Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 363. Interestingly, the American version continued with Louis Mountbatten.

With a few economical strokes of her sharpened pen, and some masterful similes, Taylor fixes the key characters in all their poignancy, exposing the futility of lives that oscillate between persistence and exhaustion. The crabby Mrs Arbuthnot, crippled with arthritis, inhabits a 'world of pain', shuffling on sticks 'like an injured insect.' (MPC, 16) Concealed beneath the crabbiness is terror at what lay ahead. Turning in bed 'there was a sound like the crushing of granulated sugar at the back of her neck' (MPC, 46). Incontinence will soon force a removal to the dreaded Braemar nursing home.<sup>43</sup> Her fellow resident, Mrs Post, eternally knitting, eternally fussing, 'vague' and 'bird-brained', is desperate to be busy and useful. But Taylor reserves her scalpel for the 'mauve-rinsed' Mrs Burton. Aiming at glamour, Mrs Burton clearly misses, and the narrator's description of time's handiwork is brutal: she fills 'the creases of her face with powder. Her face had really gone to pieces – with pouches and dewlaps and deep ravines, as if a landslide had happened.' (MPC, 14) Drinking herself into near oblivion is Mrs Burton's preferred method of consuming time.<sup>44</sup> Finally, there is the insufferable Mr Osmond, a hopeless 'dirty old fellow', who 'keeps himself going' by boring the male staff with salacious stories and writing endless letters of complaint to the newspapers, largely unpublished. Despite the obvious differences of class and sensibility that in all other circumstances would divide them, the residents share a fellow-feeling founded on a common understanding of their predicament – an existence filled with

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<sup>43</sup> Perhaps an ironic reference to Braemar Mansions, the home of Taylor's friend, Compton-Burnett.

<sup>44</sup> The name, incidentally, may be a mischievous allusion to the *other* Elizabeth Taylor, married at the time to Richard Burton.

loneliness, tedium and physical deterioration, with only certain defeat ahead. Their fiercest enemy, however, is boredom, and each schemes largely unsuccessfully to fill the time between the hours of waking and sleeping.

Time's relentlessly slow passage – what Mukherjee terms 'the viscosity of time'<sup>45</sup> – becomes the novel's leitmotif. References to its sluggish passing are scattered throughout the narrative: Mrs Palfrey made her unpacking 'last as long as she could, so that later might seem sooner' (MPC, 5); in the dining room 'sat a few other elderly ladies looking, to Mrs Palfrey, as if they had been sitting there for years. (MPC, 5); shopping 'took up much less time than she had planned' (MPC, 9); 'she looked at her watch more often, and [...] it was always earlier than she had thought it would be.' (MPC, 8); "There's a witch in that clock [...] holding it back." (MPC, 188); 'It was the hanging-about hour in which [...] one waited for dinner' (MPC, 82). At the syntactical level, the rhythmic repetition built into a number of these temporal references has the effect of making the entity of time seem strangely tangible; the reader can almost feel its gluey texture: 'As the days went by, went slowly by' (MPC, 11); 'Time went by. It could be proved that it did, although so little happened.' (MPC, 23); 'the Sunday passed. It could be said to have passed'. (MPC, 50) This final passage continues: 'It was another Sunday wrested from the geriatric ward, [Mrs Arbuthnot] told herself. And why? what for? [...] What has it *been* for?' (MPC, 50) Such existential despair, though coming at the end of life, echoes that of many of Taylor's younger women.

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<sup>45</sup> Mukherjee, "A Fiendish Mood." p. 41.

Even as both time and plot attempt to make forward progress, their paths are hindered by the many returns and repetitions in the text – *tick-tick-tick* before *tock*. As Brooks observes, repetition seems to delay time, or instead, cause it to oscillate, forming a middle that might go back or forth.<sup>46</sup> Superimposing Freud's 'masterplot for organic life' on fictive plots, Brooks argues that '[w]hat operates in the text through repetition is the death instinct, the drive toward the end.'<sup>47</sup> *Mrs Palfrey* becomes marooned in this circling middle, more able to look back than forwards. Only death breaks the circle, both at the level of plot and novelistic structure. An example of this textual circularity can be seen in the arrival of a new resident to the Claremont towards the end of the narrative. Colonel Mildmay, a male version of the military-like Mrs Palfrey, takes the reader back to Mrs Palfrey's arrival, inviting comparison between the two; and the linguistic similarities are unmistakable. The two characters' attempts to reassure themselves are expressed in near-identical terms: Mrs Palfrey's promise to herself, 'If it's not nice, I needn't stay' (MPC, 1), becomes Colonel Mildmay's, 'Well, if it doesn't suit, it's not the only place in the world' (MPC, 176). Mrs Palfrey's 'I could go to the Victoria and Albert Museum [...] There was always so much going on in London' (MPC, 8), becomes 'London was where it all happened.' [...] He would take the porcelain day by day at the Victoria and Albert Museum.' (MPC, 176) The reader by now understands this to be either misplaced sanguinity or self-delusion; Colonel Mildmay, like Mrs Palfrey, will do no such thing.

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<sup>46</sup> Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot." p. 288.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p. 291.

Rituals assist the Claremont residents to consume the many superfluous hours, most significantly those surrounding the meals that punctuate life's dailiness. Indeed, the notion of eating as ritual is explicit: the residents occupy the same tables every day, and the 'waitresses moved silently about on the thick carpet, as if assisting at a ritual.' (MPC, 5) An hour before mealtimes, residents gather in the vestibule to peruse the menu, because, as the narrator records dryly, 'food made the breaks in the day, and menus offered a little choosing, and satisfactions and disappointments, as once life had.' (MPC, 12) The meals, however, are entirely predictable: 'the menus came round fortnightly, or more often. There were permutations, but no innovations.' (MPC, 12) This last sentence neatly encapsulates life at the Claremont: while events may be shuffled and recycled they are rarely new. The residents are condemned to oscillate between the prison walls of their days until they reach the closed door of death. Watching television after dinner is one more form of ritual, pointing up the residents' role as observers rather than participants in an alien world, one dominated by the rebellious youth culture of the late 1960s: 'they made a move to the television room and, after the serial, stayed on for the news and the demonstration. There was usually a demonstration on Sundays.' (MPC, 51-52)

Another return in the text accentuates the ageing guests' wretched situation by likening their plight to a state of childhood, forcing them to relive their emotional responses to being lost lonely children abandoned far from home, without, however, youth's optimism. In Taylor's fictive hotel images of boarding-school life recur repeatedly – 'a reduced and desiccated world of

school'. (MPC, 24) Addressed by a fellow resident on her first evening, Mrs Palfrey 'blushed a little as if she were a new girl at school addressed for the first time by a prefect.' (MPC, 6) Later, it 'was like being back at school again and asked to run an errand for the head girl.' (MPC, 23) Occasionally old age is compared to an even earlier stage of life. The narrator enters Mrs Post's interior world to register her despair at the ageing process: 'It was hard work being old. It was like being a baby, in reverse. Every day for an infant means some new little thing learned; every day for the old means some little thing lost [...] Both infancy and age are tiring times.' (MPC, 184) Unlike infancy, however, where all life is ahead, now all is in the past. Michael Worton likens Beckett's plays to 'a diminishing spiral'.<sup>48</sup> It is a fitting description of *Mrs Palfrey*.

Just as at boarding school the children are occasionally taken on outings by friends and family, so too at the Claremont. Yet while the inhabitants talk effusively of their many visitors, trading doting relative stories like currency, these are largely illusory; in practice such visits are as rare as they are precious. And even those relatives who do call make little impact on life's relentless dailiness. To speak candidly of one's reliance on others, however, is to break an unwritten rule of the Claremont, and Mrs Post causes considerable alarm when openly comparing old age to childhood: "One relies on other people for the treats and things. It's like being an infant again" [...] "Being *taken out*, I mean, as if one were a school-child." (MPC, 130) Once uttered, such treacherous thoughts strip the residents of their mask of

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<sup>48</sup> Michael Worton, "Waiting for Godot and Endgame: theatre as text", in John Pilling, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, Cambridge Companions to Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994). p. 69.

independence. The aim is to maintain the appearance of sustained occupation. Strategies to consume time are vital, and vigilance required to keep despair at bay. What *Mrs Palfrey* does most effectively is demonstrate just how inexorably slowly and unproductively time passes for this small band of elderly residents. Indeed, Rosemary Dinnage rightly praises Taylor's treatment of 'the great, careful, painful enterprise of aging, the cultivation of little dignities, the planned deployment of energy, the concentration on managing time'.<sup>49</sup>

To Brooks, plot 'is a kind of arabesque or squiggle toward the end', and the various textual diversions Taylor invents contribute to this 'squiggle'.<sup>50</sup> They take the form of temporary visitors to the Claremont, and are a source of many of the narrative's comedic moments. In pointed contrast to the permanent residents, these visitors have a life beyond the hotel that will continue once they leave. The condescending Lady Swayne, arriving for her annual visit, soon insults the residents by referring to the Claremont as 'cheap and cheerful' (MPC, 79). Her self-importance is quickly punctured by the narrator, however: Lady Swayne came to London 'to have the dentist go over her old grey teeth [...] to get her corns pared [...] to buy elastic stockings' (MPC, 79). The second visitor, Mrs de Salis, causes as much excitement amongst the inhabitants as would a glamorous new teacher arriving at school. She is a 'chatterbox' with 'a low, rather husky voice, rather actressy', described as youthful since 'she was only sixty' (MPC, 112). Her lively presence reduces for a time the formality and stiffness between

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<sup>49</sup> Rosemary Dinnage, "The Tick of Blood in the Wrist", *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 September 1976, p. 1096.

<sup>50</sup> Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot." p. 292.



residents, while her refreshing honesty lessens the requirement to invent devoted relatives. Responding to a question on whether her son would visit her, she replies with unprecedented candour, "I shouldn't think so for a moment [...] Willie's got other fish to fry." (MPC, 113)

The entrance onto the scene of Ludo, however, causes the greatest disturbance within the hotel – and indeed the narrative itself. Ludo rescues Mrs Palfrey after her first fall and thereafter assumes a position of importance in her life. Young and lonely, Ludo is an outsider character with little stake in society. A failed actor, he has now turned to writing, and in Mrs Palfrey and her compatriots he finds his literary theme. To maintain the deception that Mrs Palfrey has a doting grandson, who in reality neglects her, Ludo agrees to play the part at the Claremont, thus blurring fact and fiction. Mrs Palfrey and Ludo form an unlikely liaison across the age divide, both having something to give and to gain. As Jane Brown Gillette notes, Mrs Palfrey 'creates truth out of lies': 'her creation in the end is not a fictional grandson but a real relationship.'<sup>51</sup> Yet it is an odd relationship, repeatedly compared to a kind of love affair: they 'leaned towards one another over the table, their eyes on one another's faces, like lovers.' (MPC, 45) When Ludo's visits grow scarce, Mrs Palfrey tries to forget him 'like a young girl with an unresponsive, but beloved, boy.' (MPC, 137) And she talks to others of him to make 'him feel more real – as lovers discover to the boredom of everybody else' (MPC, 164). As Barbara Frey Waxman suggests, Mrs

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<sup>51</sup> Gillette, "Oh, What a Something Web We Weave': The Novels of Elizabeth Taylor." p. 109.

Palfrey's 'is almost an adolescent infatuation', a further example of the return.<sup>52</sup>

While Ludo offers Mrs Palfrey genuine warmth and friendship, his motives are shown to be equivocal. As a youthful member of society, he has a future, while she has only the past and the stasis of the present – and his future is to be a writer. Displaying a novelist's ruthlessness, he has no hesitation in using Mrs Palfrey for his own ends. Thus a *mise-en-abyme*, a self-reflexive repetition, enters the narrative as the parasitical Ludo begins to write the story of London's ageing hotel dwellers. Even as he administers to Mrs Palfrey's damaged knee after her fall, he is squirreling away for later use harsh images of old age: 'fluffy grey knickers ... elastic ... veins on leg colour of grapes ... smell of lavender water (ugh!) ... big spots on back of shiny hands' (MPC, 29). Kissing Mrs Palfrey on the cheek, Ludo 'registered the strange, tired petal-softness of her skin, stored *that* away for future usefulness.' (MPC, 35) In her animation of Ludo and his novel-writing, Taylor draws attention to the mechanics of the writing process, worrying the threshold between the fictive and the real.

Ludo soon has his novel's morbid title: '*We aren't allowed to die here. By Ludovic Myers.*' (MPC, 36) His appearance in the text, however, can offer only a temporary stay of execution. For Mrs Palfrey and her Claremont companions, death cannot be evaded indefinitely. After a repetition of her first fall, this time in full public view, Mrs Palfrey is hurriedly transferred to a

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<sup>52</sup> Barbara Frey Waxman, *From the Hearth to the Open Road : A Feminist Study of Aging in Contemporary Literature*, Contributions in Women's Studies (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990). p. 103.

hospital where Ludo carries out a final act of kindness by arranging a private room. Her inevitable death is an exemplar of concision: we are told merely that when her daughter, 'Elizabeth arrived, her mother was already dead.' (MPC, 205) Ultimately she dies alone, offstage, beyond the margins of the text, with neither character nor reader at her bedside. Yet we are told 'it was a lovely death' (MPC, 205). The irony attached to this commonplace phrase, designed to offer comfort to the living, is not lost on the reader. Though shot through with threads of humour, the overriding tone of *Mrs Palfrey* is one of anger mixed with sadness at the way old people are treated. The hotel manager embodies society's heartless view: he needs their money, but wants them out of sight, banished to the least desirable rooms. As Mrs Palfrey reflects, gazing from her window, 'the backs of hotels, which are kept for indigent ladies, can't be expected to provide a view' (MPC, 3). Once they become an embarrassment, however, the elderly must go – 'we aren't allowed to die here'. The manager 'had been furious at the sight of a stretcher-case being carried down his steps. He was getting a little tired of these old people' (MPC, 193). Elizabeth's is a further example of the callous treatment of the elderly: too busy to visit her mother when living, she arrives too late for her death. And there was to be no death notice in the press, since 'Elizabeth and Ian had decided that there was no one left who would be interested.' (MPC, 206) This utterly bleak sentence completes the novel: the Claremont residents, the nearest Mrs Palfrey has to friends, are 'no one'. The message is unmistakable: in the youth-centred world of the late-1960s, there is no public place for the old and infirm. They must be removed to places where people are paid to look after them, but in a way that causes the

staff least trouble: 'as she deteriorates, they will not be bothered to get her out of the bed.' (MPC, 106)

Yet, Mrs Palfrey's death does not go entirely unreported, nor does it quite signal her end. Paradoxically, even as she quits her life in Taylor's text, she and her fellow residents live on, their ageing lives given renewed purpose. While Taylor could not envisage eternity in any religious sense, as literary creator she could bestow upon Mrs Palfrey an afterlife, a form of immortality, in the pages of Ludo's book. In one of several self-reflexive moments, Ludo completes his novel on the lives of the Claremont's residents just as Mrs Palfrey completes her life. In a phrase reminiscent of the physicality of Beckett, we learn that finishing the novel felt 'as if he had spewed up a whole world.' (MPC, 205) That Ludo changes the original title for his novel from '*We' are not allowed to die here* to '*They' are not allowed to die here*, underlines his distance from the ageing residents, the gulf between the generations: it is only for the elderly that the Claremont hotel represents death's antechamber.

### ***Blaming***<sup>53</sup>

As with *Mrs Palfrey*, the setting for Taylor's final novel, *Blaming*, is London, and while it is again London as death's antechamber, it is also death's 'post-chamber' – the location of those who remain living after death. A sense of

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<sup>53</sup> In a 1975 letter to Patience Ross, Taylor discusses the novel's title: "I can't quite see why, after all these years, Henry Green has the monopoly of all titles ending in 'ing' ... *Can I call it Blaming?* It really is what it is all about. People blaming others, & themselves." Quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 384.

endings pervades the novel from its opening pages – and here art tragically imitates life. As Taylor was writing *Blaming*, she herself was dying of cancer and racing the clock to complete it. ‘My mother knew that she was dying when she wrote this novel’, observes her daughter. ‘As the cancer inside her developed, so did the determination to finish this book.’<sup>54</sup> Sadly Taylor died before publication, but not before painfully correcting the proofs.<sup>55</sup> Unsurprisingly the persistent mood of the narrative is sombre and mournful, encapsulated in a beautiful but desolate winter scene painted by Elinor Bellingham Smith that features in the text: a ‘hoary, grey-white picture’ with ‘rimy branches’ (BLA, 123-124).<sup>56</sup> Death haunts this wintry text, littered as it is with funerals past and present, graveyards and cemeteries. As Neil Reeve suggests, the novel is Taylor’s ‘most concentrated study of bereavement and widowhood’.<sup>57</sup> Mirroring the novel’s grave content is Taylor’s authorial style: brisk and spare, with less of her customary detached irony. Yet despite its deadly seriousness, there are moments of quiet comedy, provided in the main by Ernie Pounce, the housekeeper referred to in Chapter 3, with his ill-fitting dentures (BLA, 63) and painful leg that has been “a bit chronic the last few days.” (BLA, 171)

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<sup>54</sup> Joanna Kingham’s Afterword to Taylor, *Blaming*.

<sup>55</sup> Liddell writes to Barbara Pym: ‘Francis King and Lady Wilson wanted to put *Blaming* on the shortlist for the Booker Prize; but Walter Allen (always hostile to Elizabeth) said it was “irredeemably trifling”!’ 21 January 1977. Barbara Pym Collection. Bodleian Library Special Collections, Oxford. Accessed January 2011.

<sup>56</sup> In the Afterword, Joanna Kingham writes that Taylor owned both paintings featured in the novel. Taylor, *Blaming*. In a 1965 letter quoted by Kingham in the introduction to Taylor’s *Complete Short Stories*, Taylor writes: ‘I nipped up to London yesterday and bought the most beautiful picture at the Leicester Galleries. It is by Elinor Bellingham Smith – a dead still, frozen world.’ Elizabeth Taylor, *Complete Short Stories* (London: Virago Press, 2012). p. ix. It seems likely that this is the painting.

<sup>57</sup> Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 80.

The plot is straightforward: Martha, a young anglophile American novelist, latches onto Amy and her artist husband Nick when cruising in Turkey. Wholly antagonistic towards Martha, Amy considers her an 'irritant', a 'leech', and later likens her to 'a dead albatross' (BLA, 125). Ironically, it is this 'irritant' who rescues Amy when disaster strikes: while the cruise is intended as convalescence following Nick's surgery, it proves to be his final trip when he suffers a fatal heart attack. Martha, with characteristic unselfishness, leaves the cruise to accompany Amy home with the corpse: "I thought I might be better than no one." (BLA, 33) A rereading of the novel cannot fail to reveal both the poignancy and irony of this statement as the narrative repeatedly confirms that Amy would in fact prefer no one to Martha.

In its depiction of Amy and her anachronistic lifestyle, the novel once more looks back to an earlier part of the century. A woman of late middle-age, Amy has never worked outside the home, wears white gloves abroad, and though living alone, has a housekeeper in residence. It is, however, the concept of anachorism that frames my examination of *Blaming*, in the form of the anachoristic figure of Martha. She is an outsider in a number of ways: an American in London, an unconventional modern woman amid Amy's old-fashioned middle-class world, and a writer who stands apart from life to scrutinise it. Martha's and Amy's lives become impossibly entangled, and it is this entanglement that shapes the narrative. Located largely in the space between Nick's death and Martha's suicide,<sup>58</sup> the text is a study in how

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<sup>58</sup> According to Taylor's biographer, Martha is based on Taylor's close friend, Maud Geddes, who in 1956 committed suicide. See Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. pp. 184-192. Liddell writes of *Blaming*: 'we cannot help feeling that she is exposing an old wound and

imagination fails two disparate but interconnected women, with fatal consequences. Paradoxically, little blaming occurs in *Blaming*: of the two main characters, one is too self-absorbed to blame herself and the other too generous to blame anyone but herself. Instead it is an activity left to the reader.

The protagonists are constructed as binary opposites: Amy is middle-aged, ultra-conventional and well-groomed, where Martha is young, bohemian and unkempt; Amy is self-centred, heartless and parsimonious, where Martha is selfless, compassionate and generous. Amy is “simply not interested in other people”, and can hardly be bothered with her own family, where Martha is endlessly curious (BLA, 75). Most significantly, Amy proves to be an accomplished survivor, where Martha can only ever be a casualty. Even as most of the narrative is focalized through Amy, she is essentially – and unusually for Taylor – a largely ‘flat’ character, since she remains peculiarly impervious to change and development despite all that befalls her. In this respect she calls to mind *The Soul of Kindness*’s perpetual infant, Flora. Martha, on the other hand, is a more nuanced and complex creation. Of the two, any compassion the narrator expresses is reserved primarily for Martha. Indeed, an unmistakable anger at Amy’s treatment of Martha seeps between the textual interstices.

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exorcizing the ghost of her friend Maud’. He adds, however, that Martha is not at all like Maud, nor is Amy like Elizabeth. Liddell, *Elizabeth and Ivy*. p. 120.

Reeve suggests that Amy's rejection of Martha is due to her 'mental habits [being] too ingrained, driven further in by her grief'.<sup>59</sup> Amy's selfishness, however, is due to more than a certain inflexibility of mind. 'Mourning seemed to give the go-ahead for every sort of rudeness and selfishness', comments Amy's son, James. (BLA, 36) When he suggests to his wife that Amy "was never like it before", the narrator observes knowingly that 'his wife would make no reply.' (BLA, 36) Throughout the narrative it is James who, albeit rather sanctimoniously, reflects the text's moral position; he alone challenges Amy's egregious behaviour, constantly reminding her of Martha's many kindnesses. Amy, however, refuses to reciprocate the compassion Martha has shown; and the text demonstrates how an apparently harmless woman can cause irreparable damage. As Florence Leclercq observes, 'Amy's indifference to anyone's problems makes her one of the most selfish characters in Taylor's fiction', and it is difficult to disagree.<sup>60</sup>

Certainly self-centredness contributes to Amy's conduct. Martha's first impression of her was that physically she 'seemed to have remained at the age of seventeen'. (BLA, 16). The same might be said of Amy's emotional development – and her resemblance to the two-dimensional Flora persists. Like Flora, Amy expects to be looked after by the men in her life and, of course, she is. And like Flora, her life is one of idleness and stagnation, one de Beauvoir would surely condemn for its 'immanence'. Remembering stultifying Sunday afternoons with Nick, Amy muses, 'I used to feel bored [...] and long for something bracing, even dangerous, to happen. And if he could

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<sup>59</sup> Reeve, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 80.

<sup>60</sup> Leclercq, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 105.



return, I should be bored again, just the same.’ (BLA, 143) Indeed, Martha’s only value in Amy’s terms is to help her consume the interminable hours: Martha’s ‘visits grew frequent, and after she had gone home, Amy could notch up a little score of hours passed – not in pleasure, but passed’ (BLA, 82). As with the Claremont residents, time takes on a viscous quality.

It is, however, self-preservation that proves to be Amy’s motivating force, signalled early in the narrative when, in the wake of Nick’s death, Amy is observed by Martha waiting to disembark wearing a ‘pair of white cotton gloves [...] as if she were trying to cover as much of herself as possible.’ (BLA, 30) The gloves clearly signify a desire to protect and separate herself from others, while the colour white, used here paradoxically, symbolises both innocence and purity. Though Amy’s numerous failures of kindness towards Martha are due in part to selfishness and a lack of imagination – an unwillingness or inability to empathise – at a deeper level her sense of security is threatened, for Martha represents death. Her close involvement with Nick’s demise draws death repeatedly into Amy’s home, and death generates fear in all those it touches: fear of dying, of continued living, of life beyond death, of the unknown. As discussed in Chapter 2, Freud’s ‘uncanny’ ‘belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread’.<sup>61</sup> To many, he writes, ‘the acme of the uncanny is represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts.’<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*. p. 123.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* p. 148.

The doubling of Amy with Martha suggests the mirroring of the 'Heimlich' with the 'Unheimlich'. Amy fears and dislikes Martha because Martha is 'Unheimlich', contaminating Amy's 'Heimlich' life with notions of death, with what is uncomfortable and unfamiliar, prompting fears of Amy's own mortality. Furthermore, there is a repetitious quality to Martha's many unwelcome visits to Amy's home. Repetition, writes Freud, 'will perhaps not be acknowledged by everyone as a source of the uncanny', but under certain circumstances, can evoke such a feeling.<sup>63</sup> As Freud notes, 'our unconscious is still as unreceptive as ever to the idea of our own mortality.'<sup>64</sup> Amy's grief, though real, is curiously short-lived. By the end of this circular novel, she is planning to marry a man very like Nick, echoing the marriage of Kate to a double of her first husband after Dermot's death in *In a Summer Season*. As the narrator observes, 'Widowhood began. Amy tried to get through it, as if it were a temporary affliction.' (BLA, 47) Her decision to remarry is an attempt to cheat death by turning back to an earlier stage in her life, thereby extending her existence. And her choice of husband will undoubtedly ensure her continued protection, and indeed boredom: he imagines himself happily 'advising, consoling, sheltering' (BLA, 190).

Freud discusses the instinct for self-preservation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, arguing controversially that organisms are essentially conservative and aim to return to earlier states; they wish to remain unchanged. It would thus 'be in contradiction to the conservative nature of instincts if the goal of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p. 143.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p. 148.

life were a state of things which had never been obtained.<sup>65</sup> Hence, Freud concludes, 'with a certain bravado', according to Brooks, that if the original hypothesis is correct, '*the aim of all life is death*'.<sup>66</sup> The instinct for self-preservation, Freud contends, does not conflict with the apparently antagonistic death instinct if we accept that the instinct for self-preservation wants the organism to follow its *own* path towards death and not have death forced upon it. Thus the organism fights external dangers (Martha, for example) that will precipitate its early death and deny it a natural one, one that occurs due to 'internal causes'.<sup>67</sup> In an underground station with Martha, Amy 'stood pressed to the wall, against an advertisement for a plunge bra. She always felt terror as the train sped towards her, lest she should be sucked under in its onrush, or, that in some fit of madness, she might take it into her head to leap onto the electric rail.' (BLA, 89) This odd scene juxtaposes the ordinariness of an underwear advert against the terror of death, illustrating Taylor's desire to uncover the strangeness within the everyday. At an unconscious level Amy understands Martha's presence to generate in her a fear of death, even suicide, which of course is to be Martha's destiny. Martha at the same moment is weighing life and death on the platform edge, thus illustrating at once the life and death instincts.

In 'Our Attitude towards Death', Freud argues that the 'fear of death, which dominates us oftener than we know [...] is usually the outcome of a sense of

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<sup>65</sup> *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Vol. 18. (1920-1922). Freud et al., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. p. 38.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38. Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot." p. 290.

<sup>67</sup> Freud et al., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. p. 44.

guilt.<sup>68</sup> While Amy is depicted as a callous figure, towards the close of the narrative her carapace cracks and a trickle of guilt seeps through. As Martha leaves for an uncertain future in America, Amy reflects: 'I did nothing for her' (BLA, 146). Yet the narrator instantly undercuts this atypically contrite sentiment: 'As if in some other way she might compensate for this, she went down to the kitchen, and sat nibbling a biscuit, and listened to Ernie.' (BLA, 146) For Amy, as for Flora before her, shame is unsustainable. At the close, after Martha's suicide, Amy returns to her former state of Flora-like self-delusion, her instinct for self-preservation triumphing. The last line reads: "What else could I have done?" (BLA, 190) Fearing death, and lacking the imagination and empathy to step outside her own situation, Amy could have done nothing else. While she plainly requires no response to this rhetorical question, directing it towards the inanimate rain, the text invites the reader to provide one.

While Amy lacks both empathy and imagination, Martha has an excess of both. And it is Martha's blurring of imagination and reality that proves her downfall: when at last imagination fails, her existence must end, since her real and fictive lives are dangerously interwoven. Martha's death is prefigured early in the narrative, when we learn she is an author of 'sad *contes* about broken love affairs, of depressed and depressing women.' (BLA, 14) (It is the narrator who judges the women 'depressing', a rare narratorial intrusion.) Heralding her actual death, however, is a number of smaller deaths: the end of her life in England; the failure of her marriage in

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<sup>68</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Our Attitude towards Death", Vol. 14. (1914- 1916). Ibid. p. 297.

America; and most significantly, the death of hope in a miserable hotel room. While Amy is pressing herself against the wall in the tube station, Martha is 'balancing herself on the very edge of the platform, peering into the darkness of the tunnel' (BLA, 89), a metaphor for her ultimate struggle between living and dying, and her conclusion that only blackness lay ahead. In the end Martha cannot cross the chasm between Beckett's 'I can't go on' and 'I'll go on.' As the creator of dejected suicidal women, and one moreover who struggles to distinguish the fictive from the real, Martha will inevitably die at her own hands, the author of her own destiny.

When at Highgate Cemetery Amy is asked what she would choose to be carved on her gravestone, she replies with unusual candour: "I think I should like 'She meant well.' But I'm afraid I haven't always." The narrator adds briskly, 'Martha, who had her own answer ready, was not asked'. (BLA, 84) This brief exchange, one among many similarly dispiriting, reveals simultaneously the generosity of one and the selfishness of the other. Though never revealed, a rereading of the text suggests Martha's chosen epitaph to be 'she waited and hoped'. Preparing to leave her beloved England, she is filled with apprehension: "Wait and hope, [...] It's what *I'm* doing – though I can't evade the foreboding." (BLA, 142-143) Departing England is Martha's first death, suggested by her question to Amy: "If you knew you had just a week, or a month perhaps, to live, what would you do?" (BLA, 143). The ever-practical Amy replies that she would sort out her

papers and clothes.<sup>69</sup> Though not asked, Martha adds: “I should kill myself at once. I couldn’t bear to hang about waiting for it.” (BLA, 143)

Amy’s view of Martha’s fiction is predictable: ‘what a stifling little world it was, of a love affair gone wrong, of sleeping-pills and contraceptives, tears, immolation; a woman on her own.’<sup>70</sup> (BLA, 47) Martha’s England is pure fantasy, a piece of nostalgia, epitomised by an old-English tea-shop ‘with horse-brasses, an imitation log fire’, and a ‘lady in a flowered overall’ (BLA, 128). It might be a scene from a pre-war domestic drama. For Martha, imagined worlds are more real than reality. Despite her heartless treatment at Amy’s hands, she always returns for more – out of loneliness, misplaced loyalty, pity, or simply because her fictional version of Amy is a good friend. When offered marriage and a return to America, against all evidence to the contrary, Martha tries to imagine a worthwhile life for herself there:

the town where they would have to live in America was a university town [...] perhaps they could make some life there, amongst people who read books, who might even have read her own books. There might be pleasant evenings of talk in one another’s houses [...] The place [...] might not after all be as bad as it sounded. (BLA, 130)

The many hesitations and uncertainties, however, suggest that such an optimistic picture is unlikely, further undermined by the reality of Simon as dull, melancholic, needy and frugal. Later, however, a more rational picture emerges: “Maybe I shall pine for *here* when I’m shut up in a little apartment with just Simon, not able to find my way around.” (BLA, 140) She tells Amy:

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<sup>69</sup> According to Joanna Kingham, this is exactly what her mother did. Afterword to Taylor, *Blaming*.

<sup>70</sup> Simone de Beauvoir’s women in *The Woman Destroyed* (1967) come to mind.

“you won’t be able to imagine *me*, or my life. That makes me feel unreal.” (BLA, 140) That Martha feels real only if imagined by someone else reflects her problematic relationship to reality and fantasy – she might almost be a character in one of her own novels. And since Amy cares little for Martha and is quite without imagination, she will not even try, but Martha would not know this: her imagined Amy is a true friend. After Martha’s death, Amy is given a rare moment of insight when she articulates the slippage Martha experiences between the real and the imaginary: ‘She talked mostly of painters who were dead, or people in books who were never alive.’ (BLA, 181) In a sense, fiction is Martha’s only reality, her only comfort, not least when reality becomes too grim.

Yet in America, just when she needs it most, Martha’s imagination fails her. And because fact and fiction are so entwined within her, her literary failure anticipates her failure to imagine her life continuing. Notably, it is her novel of London with which she struggles – she can no longer fictionalise an existence there. Instead, Martha writes numerous letters, relegating fiction to something she escapes into but can no longer create. Endlessly reading novels, she pens detailed critical notes to the supremely uninterested Amy. As with her life in America, Martha’s letter-writing occurs beyond the textual margins, and the contents, charting the progress of her deep depression, are mediated through the narrator and Amy. Driven by self-preservation, Amy distances herself from the disagreeable, postponing reading the letters until she must: ‘a little dreariness to be deferred, news, no doubt, of novel going badly, marriage going badly’ (BLA, 153). As William May observes, the

'spaces and gaps between the women are performed literally through their correspondence.'<sup>71</sup> Just as the space between Martha's letters and Amy's replies grows ever-wider, so too that between the narrator's poignant descriptions of Martha's miserable life and Amy's callous reactions. Though we are told that the 'envelopes were crammed with sadness' (BLA, 164), Amy's replies are full of platitudes: 'sorry this', 'sorry that', 'sorry about' (BLA, 164), resenting even the cost of postage.

Martha's final epistle so plainly begs for Amy's support that only the pitiless could refuse her – and even Amy experiences twinges of guilt for her neglect in the days following Martha's return to England. What increases her disquiet, however, is the prospect of others blaming her. 'Painful insights visited on people with no tendency to introspection, no gift for detachment', comments Amis, 'have always tended to come the way of Elizabeth Taylor's characters, and it is in the nature of things that Amy's should give her no help at all in facing her future.'<sup>72</sup> Rather than challenge her selfish conduct, Amy's future husband simply consoles her, echoing the way Flora's protectors rally round when for one brief moment Flora suspects she has behaved badly. Martha's suicide note, her final 'so sweet and loving' letter (BLA, 186), is sent to husband, Simon. He reports that she had taken an overdose 'at an hour of depression, of pain, of loneliness and futility; of, worst of all, she said, of having let him down. She had begged for his forgiveness' (BLA, 174). In contrast to her double, Martha is all too ready to blame herself.

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<sup>71</sup> William May, "Reporting Back, or The Difficulty of Addressing Elizabeth Taylor", in "Elizabeth Taylor: A Centenary Celebration," ed. N. H. Reeve (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012). p. 125.

<sup>72</sup> Kingsley Amis, "Left-over life to kill", review of *Blaming*, *Observer*, 12 September, 1976.



As quoted above, Freud writes that in fiction we 'die with the hero [...] yet we survive him'.<sup>73</sup> Since Martha can no longer disentangle unreality from reality, she is unable to 'die with the hero' and still 'survive him': she *is* the hero. In Freudian terms, Martha's death instinct overcomes her instinct for self-preservation, her life instinct – her fear of continued living exceeds her fear of death. And instead of striving for a natural death in a timely manner from internal causes, she orchestrates her own by external means. In 'The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman', Freud explains 'the enigma of suicide' thus:

probably no one finds the mental energy required to kill himself unless, in the first place, in doing so he is at the same time killing an object with whom he has identified himself, and, in the second place, is turning against himself a death-wish which had been directed against someone else. Nor need the regular discovery of these unconscious death-wishes in those who have attempted suicide surprise us [...] since the unconscious of all human beings is full enough of such death-wishes, even against those they love.<sup>74</sup>

Martha's suicide, Freud might argue, is a way of punishing both Amy and Simon for failing her – 'turning against himself a death-wish which had been directed against someone else' – but consciously at least, she blames no one but herself. Instead she is 'killing an object with whom he has identified himself' – she becomes one of her own characters. Marooned in a seedy hotel room, Martha kills herself as all hope drains away: '*I couldn't bear to hang about waiting for it.*' She is destroyed by loneliness, a failure of

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<sup>73</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Our Attitude towards Death", Vol. 14. (1914-1916). Freud et al., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. p. 291.

<sup>74</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", Vol. 18. (1920-1922). *Ibid.* p. 162.

imagination, and the death of hope; her fictional world of sad women becomes her own, and death her inevitable end: '*what a stifling little world it was, of a love affair gone wrong, of sleeping-pills and contraceptives, tears, immolation; a woman on her own.*' It is difficult to support Kingsley Amis's observation that *Blaming* 'is not in the least a gloomy book.'<sup>75</sup> And while Robin Grove's conclusion that *Blaming* 'is not a comfortable novel' is more apt, it is still an understatement.<sup>76</sup> That Amy fails to act upon Martha's unmistakable cry for help is entirely consistent with her temperament and the mood of the novel. 'In her fictional world as a whole' observes Leclercq, 'Taylor, who does not believe in God, lays much stress upon solidarity between human beings as the upholding force in an otherwise meaningless world.'<sup>77</sup> *Blaming* is a paradigmatic example of what happens when such solidarity is not forthcoming.

## Endings

Brooks writes in 'Freud's Masterplot' that the 'function of the end' in narrative 'continues to fascinate and baffle.'<sup>78</sup> This is certainly true of Taylor's fiction. In this section my examination centres on why the endings of her novels are so frequently ambiguous, and why they so often sweep the reader back to the beginning via the literary device of the return, thus disturbing temporal linearity. In short, I analyse the function of the end in her novels, and my conclusion is that Taylor's novels are circular or ambiguous because, after

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<sup>75</sup> Kingsley Amis, "Left-over life to kill", review of *Blaming*, *Observer*, 12 September, 1976.

<sup>76</sup> Grove, "From the Island: Elizabeth Taylor's Novels." p. 95.

<sup>77</sup> Leclercq, *Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 104.

<sup>78</sup> Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot." p. 282.

the many horrors of the century, neither life nor fiction can ever again offer a sense of completion. Brooks argues that the 'desire of the text', which he equates with the desire of reading, 'is ultimately the desire for the end, for that recognition which is the moment of the death of the reader in the text.'<sup>79</sup> But what happens to reader experience if the end is not a final death but a return? Comparing life to fiction in *A Sense of an Ending*, Kermode proposes the 'tick-tock' of a clock as a paradigm for a very simple plot. He writes that we humans want to understand the time between 'the *tick* of birth and the *tock* of death'.<sup>80</sup> Despite or perhaps because of the complexity found in both literature and life, our aim, according to Kermode, is 'to maintain within that interval following *tick* a lively expectation of *tock*, and a sense that however remote *tock* may be, all that happens happens as if *tock* were certainly following.'<sup>81</sup> In summary, 'to make sense of our lives from where we are, as it were, stranded in the middle, we need fictions of beginnings and fictions of ends, fictions which unite beginning and end and endow the interval between them with meaning.'<sup>82</sup> Designating such fictions 'concord-fictions', Kermode likens them to the plots of novels.<sup>83</sup>

He might be describing the *tick-tock* fiction created by Taylor's writer-figure, Beth, in *A View of the Harbour*. Refusing to admit reality's daily mundanity into her fictive worlds, Beth creates works of pure imagination, safe sentimental worlds crammed with melodrama, complete with the comforting

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. pp. 292, 296.

<sup>80</sup> Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending : Studies in the Theory of Fiction : With a New Epilogue*. p. 58.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p. 46.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p. 190.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. p. 190.

linearity of beginnings, middles and ends. As *A View of the Harbour* closes, Beth finishes her novel, expressing at once the euphoria and fear that must suffuse every writer who has ever allowed her work to face the public's critical gaze: "This is it" she thought. "This is the only moment and the whole reward. The ends of the circle are brought together and tied, and in the tying of the knot is perfect bliss, a second only, before all the doubts and anxieties begin again and other people step in." (AVH, 312) Taylor, however, whose literary sensibility is diametrically opposed to Beth's, refuses to unite the ends of the circle, to tie neat structural knots in her novels. Indeed, in this respect Taylor's texts owe something to modernist fiction which invariably resists the sense of completion the nineteenth-century realist novel offers the reader. Nonetheless, as Kermode observes of even the most experimental texts, the 'novel will end; a full close may be avoided, but there will be a close'.<sup>84</sup> It is the 'fascinating and baffling' manner in which Taylor closes her novels that is the concern of this final section.

If we are to consider ends, however, we must begin with beginnings, for as Taylor comments to Brian Glanville in an interview on the short-story form, the end 'is there in its shape before you begin', agreeing with Glanville that 'the end is in fact implicit in the beginning'.<sup>85</sup> It is a notion Brooks pursues in his discussion of Sartre's *La Nausée*: 'The beginning in fact presupposes the end. The very possibility of meaning plotted through time depends on the anticipated structuring force of the ending: the interminable would be the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p. 145.

<sup>85</sup> Transcription of a BBC *World of Books* discussion between Taylor and Brian Glanville, broadcast 7 August 1965. BBC Written Archives, Caversham, Reading. Accessed March 2011.

meaningless.<sup>86</sup> In several of Taylor's novels the beginning prefigures the end, as noted in *Mrs Palfrey* above. *The Soul of Kindness*, for example, opens with the childlike Flora the centre of attention, selfish and self-absorbed, and ends in similar vein, Flora having matured not a jot. *A Game of Hide and Seek* begins with the teenage would-be lovers, Harriet and Vesey, playing hide-and-seek with two young children, Joseph and Deirdre. When Joseph suggests that Harriet and Vesey should run off in different directions, the prophetic Deirdre 'knew that they would never part.' (GHS, 1) The final scene has Harriet reunited with her possibly dying lover, Vesey, and the closing line reads: She 'said his name and took him in her arms.' (GHS, 260)

Such an ambiguous yet ultimately pessimistic ending is very common in Taylor's oeuvre. Elucidating her literary aesthetic to Russell in 1947, Taylor writes: 'I break in at a certain stage of people's emotional developments, not the beginning, and leave them with the end merely indicated'.<sup>87</sup> That her fictive endings can be ambivalent or ambiguous has been acknowledged frequently in this study, suggesting that her narratives begin before and continue long after the textual journey shared with the reader. Though very different stylistically, Taylor shares this approach with Compton-Burnett of whose fiction Taylor writes: 'Words fly and flash, not over politics or religion, but over behaviour and what may lie behind it. We feel that they were flying

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<sup>86</sup> Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot." p. 283.

<sup>87</sup> Taylor to Ray Russell August 1947, quoted in Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. pp.127-128.

and flashing long before the book opens and that the last page will not interrupt them.<sup>88</sup>

The only certainty to be found in many of Taylor's fictive endings is the disappointment or dissatisfaction signalled, generally in the form of a rather tired or improbable married life. Happily-ever-after Taylor's dénouements are not, for as we have seen, relationships in her oeuvre are rarely happy or 'ever-after'. The marriage in Taylor's very first novel, *At Mrs Lippincote's*, is paradigmatic. After Roddy's affair has been revealed at the end of the narrative, he asks his wife, Julia: "How can you love what you do not respect?" She replies:

"Women have to," [...] feeling he was playing into her hand, like a character on the stage, grateful to him for giving her this chance, as if he had given her a cue in a play. "I have never admired you, Roddy, in the ways in which you expected admiration. In which women are supposed to admire men." (AML, 214)

To underline the intense theatricality of this odd passage, the text's last line has Julia, 'with a great rattle and flourish', drawing the 'curtains across the window for the last time.' (AML, 215) While the scene owes much to clichéd melodrama, it nonetheless presages an uncertain future. Moreover, as noted in Chapter 2, it leads the reader back to the beginning, to the moment when Julia first discovers the secret love affair.

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<sup>88</sup> Elizabeth Taylor, "Ivy Compton-Burnett (1951)," in *The Vogue Bedside Book*, ed. Josephine Ross (London: Vermilion, 1984). p. 214.

Whether thematic or structural, the device of the return in Taylor's fiction draws the reader back to the start and urges a rereading, a re-examination of the text, something Taylor must surely have desired. Indeed, she articulates such a suggestion through the character of Mrs Arbuthnot in *Mrs Palfrey*, though sadly without further explanation: "One can always read a good book twice, [...] In fact one always *should* read a good book twice." (MPC, 23) As with any rereading, the reader, now familiar with character and plot, can more fully savour language and style. But more importantly, in a Taylor text the reader's experience is enhanced by delving between the cracks in the outwardly conventional textual façade to discover the strangeness within, a strangeness that may embrace philosophical ideas on the nature of existence, a strangeness that may speak to Beckett and Freud. Rereading was something Bowen advocated both in her many reviews of Taylor's fiction and in her letters to Taylor. Of *The Wedding Group*, she writes that it has no end: 'it continues. It is to be gone deeper into the more one thinks about it, and think about it I do.'<sup>89</sup>

That most of Taylor's texts exhibit a sense of circularity or return has been discussed at various points in this study. For example, the suicide that closes *A Wreath of Roses* echoes the one that opens it, urging the reader to reread the text with the foreknowledge of the risk Camilla takes in pursuing her fascination with the villain, Richard. *A View of the Harbour* begins and ends with just this: a view of the harbour. As the novel begins the fishermen trawl away from a shabby, neglected waterfront that becomes increasingly

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<sup>89</sup> Bowen to Taylor, 3 May 1968. Taylor papers. Accessed 10 May 2011.

picturesque the further they travel (a metaphor perhaps for Taylor's literary practice of dissecting superficially 'picturesque' domestic life to expose the shabbiness between the cracks). The narrative concludes with a view of the harbour from a yacht sailing towards shore. The sailor's thought is that "Nothing has changed", when the reader knows everything has. As *Angel* closes Angel is on her deathbed, lost and terrified, enclosed within her solipsistic existence, believing herself to be: 'back at the very beginning. It is to be done all over again' (ANG, 249). She is returned to the young girl who opens the novel, still with her writer's destiny ahead – all is to be lived again.

'Narrative', argues Brooks, 'always makes the implicit claim to be in a state of repetition, as a going over again of a ground already covered', that is, the retelling, the repetition of a story that has already happened.<sup>90</sup> If, as Brooks claims, this appears to be 'initiatory of narrative', then Taylor's narratives require a further repetition. Considerable humour and comic irony infuse her novels, centring on the many delightfully absurd people and situations that constitute daily life within the domestic at mid-century. While such comedic moments may serve to point up the harshness and anger that so often churn between the lines, without attentive reading they can also obscure them. Witness the comment by Amis on *Blaming*: '*not in the least a gloomy book*'. Taylor's novels are circular because there can never be a tidy ending, in either life or its fictive equivalent. Thus the text invites us to return to the beginning and start again, though in practice the trajectory is often less circular than the 'diminishing spiral' Worton attributes to Beckett's plays;

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<sup>90</sup> Brooks, "Freud's Masterplot." p. 285.



awareness of the end ensures that we set out on the repeat journey with reduced optimism.

Taylor lived the century through wars, and her texts suggest that after the atrocities committed during these wars, swiftly followed by the ever-present fear of the Cold War, life would never again be linear, straightforward and simple. The version of death that began during the First World War never goes away, the trauma lives on. Taylor's disordering of temporal linearity reflects the fact that in neither life nor fiction could *tick* ever again be followed effortlessly by *tock*. And while direct references to political conflict are few, its egregious effects stain Taylor's narratives. The anger and despair manifested in the interstices of her first novel persist to the very last. As with life, not least her own, Taylor's imaginary worlds are complex, ambiguous, uncertain, often cruel, and cannot be neatly tidied away. We have seen how the commonplace view through a butcher's window in *At Mrs Lippincote's* can be recast as a bloody battleground epitomising the horror that is war. Within the textual fissures of the shop girls' light-hearted antics in *A Game of Hide and Seek* seeps an existential discourse on loneliness, fear and desolation. And behind Bertram's ostensibly good-natured stranger in *A View of the Harbour* stands a man who can destroy another's life simply through selfishness and neglect.

Given her life-long antipathy towards cruelty and injustice, Taylor never quite leaves behind the postwar sense of hopelessness she articulated through Frances in *A Wreath of Roses*: 'Life's not simplicity [...] Not loving-kindness

either. It's darkness, and the terrible things we do to one another, and to ourselves.' (AWR, 119) Anger sweeps through her novels, anger at 'the terrible things we do to one another' in the name of war, at women's position in society at mid-century, at the way a person can be harmed by neglect or selfishness, at the plight of the abandoned elderly – anger and despair at the ultimate loneliness and isolation at the base of human existence. It is, however, plainly overstating the case to suggest that Taylor's novels are in any sense cheerless: they can be extremely funny, moving and at times life-affirming. Nonetheless, both the ambiguity of the endings and the circularity of the texts encourage the reader to reflect on the messy, darker side of life, clearly present in the two novels featured in this chapter, *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* and *Blaming*.

## Conclusion

When I first began to think about writing a thesis on the novels of Elizabeth Taylor, I was struck by an obituary that appeared in *The New York Times*. Harold Pinter was described as having a gift for ‘finding the ominous in the everyday’.<sup>1</sup> This notion of finding something unusual within life’s dailiness was a useful starting point, but ultimately proved too limiting as a framing device: this was only a part of what I wanted to do. My second thought was to consider Taylor as a liminal writer, writing a literature of liminality. But this too proved to be a false start: while the concept allowed me to consider Taylor as a writer on the edge, writing a fiction on the borders, it proved too spatial an approach, leaving out the important element of time. I reached my particular methodological approach by first understanding Taylor as woman who did not wholly belong to her seemingly conventional life, writing a fiction that did not wholly fit within the conventions of realist fiction. From this emerged the two concepts that have allowed me to examine Taylor’s fiction both spatially and temporally.

By filtering Taylor’s texts through the prism of my twinned concepts, anachronism and anachorism, I have been able to concentrate on those aspects of her novels that do not quite fit – that are either out of time or place within the category of domestic realist fiction – prompting a rethinking of their categorisation. My methodological approach has shaped an analysis of the structure, style, and language, together with the literary and historical

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<sup>1</sup> Mel Gussow and Ben Brantley, *The New York Times*, 26 December 2008.

contexts that inflect Taylor's writing, at times privileging one concept then the other, to expose the unexpected in Taylor's far from straightforward form of domestic fiction. The concept of anachronism has enabled me to demonstrate that, even as Taylor's novels look back to earlier literary and historical times, they simultaneously engage with their contemporary socio-political moment. The gothic tropes injected into Taylor's 1940s novels, for example, establish an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear that pervades the narratives, speaking clearly to the Second World War and its aftermath; the outdated 1950s servant-figure is seen to comment on the enduring effects of war and the emerging transformations in society; the deeply unsatisfactory lives of Taylor's seemingly old-fashioned 1960s women prompt a feminist discourse on woman as 'other'. And, structurally, Taylor uses the temporal notions of repetition and return to reflect on how time congeals or becomes circular as death enters her novels of the 1970s.

The second concept, anachorism, drives an examination of all that is unusual in Taylor's novels, not least their engagement with contemporary philosophical ideas. Taylor smuggles into her texts, for example, a dramatisation of the contentious postwar art-versus-life dichotomy; an existential discourse on the nature and purpose of existence; allusions to the fear and horror of war; and a political/philosophical conversation that speaks to the feminism of Simone de Beauvoir. Above all, the concept of anachorism shapes an examination of the strangeness, rage and despair that leach through the textual crevices of Taylor's novels. In the main, early critical analysis recognised in her writing the irony but not the anger, the

fineness of her prose but not its peculiarity, the humour but not the darkness, the influence of Austen and Woolf but not Compton-Burnett and Beckett, the traditional but not the innovative in her poetics.

To explore these less obvious aspects, I have employed the metaphor of 'the scalpel within the kid glove', which in pointing to the way Taylor writes, also suggests a way to read her. The 'scalpel' incongruously placed within the 'kid glove' exposes all that is extraordinary and unanticipated in the structure and content of her novels – the oddness in ordinary people, the strangeness in 'everyday' domestic fiction. While Taylor's novels can clearly be enjoyed simply for the reading experience, at the same time they ask to be read in a more challenging way, one that reaches between the cracks for the parts that may at first surprise the reader. Yet the innocuous covers of Virago Press do little to point to this second way of reading. Those from the 1980s and '90s feature paintings of charming, serene interiors or still lifes, and the updated versions contain photographs of young, mainly glamorous women – all apparently targeted at a female readership that may be searching for a pleasurable, but not especially demanding read. Taylor's novels, however, both destabilise reader expectation and trouble the category of domestic realism into which her work is habitually placed. To suggest this more demanding method of reading, I should want to see on the covers of her novels something that disrupts the beauty of the image: an ugly cactus within a flower arrangement, for instance, or flies settling on a delicious bowl of fruit.

In attaching a particular theme to Taylor's novels of a discrete decade, the structure of the thesis may at first appear somewhat contrived, an artificial linking of a subject to a period in time. In practice, however, the major themes I chose to examine presented themselves already linked fairly precisely to a period. All but one of Taylor's 1940s novels are steeped in the aftermath of war; her fictive servants of the 1950s were given more authority in the texts than earlier or later constructs, and their voices were thus more clearly heard; given the rapid societal changes occurring during the 1960s, Taylor's out-of-date 1960s women were ideal candidates for examination; and death was always going to be significant in the decade of Taylor's own death. Still, a certain amount of compromise was necessary: the topic of death, for instance, is prominent in all her work, and a woman's life of immanence is a recurrent motif.

My aim has been to challenge the opinion, widespread until comparatively recently, that Taylor created little more than a finely-crafted form of conventional domestic fiction that offered a perceptive critique of middle-class life. Unsurprisingly Taylor's novels have been largely ignored by the literary academy, receiving little serious critical attention at any point during or after her lifetime. Towards the end of the twentieth century, however, her fiction featured in a number of works that took a chiefly socio-cultural approach to the postwar novels of women writers, exploring in particular woman's changing role in society. In drawing attention to the fiction of many neglected or underrated women writers, these studies provided a valuable re-examination of the mid-century literary landscape. Their centre of interest,

however, was primarily theme and content, rather than form or style. More recent criticism has begun to examine closely the structure and poetics, together with the literary and historical influences, of texts by mid-century writers such as Taylor. This scholarship destabilises earlier, often reductive, readings by bringing to light a fictive form that is more experimental, more innovative, more subtly engaged with contemporary political and philosophical debates, and altogether richer, than was previously acknowledged.

This thesis contributes to this lively scholarship by positioning Taylor's novels firmly within a more complicated literary terrain. My particular contribution is to recognise Taylor as an 'after-modernist' whose literary poetics combines the psychological realism of Austen with the modernism of Woolf, richly blended with the peculiarity of Compton-Burnett and just a dash of Beckett. Mix all this with Taylor's own history and the socio-political context of the mid-twentieth century, and we find a writer and a fiction darker and more problematical than many literary critics have recognised.

My study, however, and almost all the critical studies to date have focused on Taylor's novels. Little attention has been afforded her short stories, which number some sixty-five, written over a thirty-year period. Most of these were published by Virago in four collections during her lifetime, and later reprinted.<sup>2</sup> There is to date no comprehensive critical edition of these short

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor, *Hester Lilly : And Other Stories*; Elizabeth Taylor, *The Blush : And Other Stories*, Virago Modern Classics (London: Virago, 1986); Taylor, *A Dedicated Man, and Other Stories*; Elizabeth Taylor, *The Devastating Boys and Other Stories*, Virago Modern Classics (London: Virago, 1984).

stories.<sup>3</sup> Just as much mid-twentieth-century fiction has until lately been overlooked in literary circles, so too the short story, due perhaps to a kind of literary snobbery: because short stories appear in publications such as women's magazines, they are judged 'popular' and thus unworthy of serious study.<sup>4</sup> In the last two decades, however, there have been a number of valuable critical works exploring the short-story form.<sup>5</sup>

Within my thesis there has been no space to include Taylor's many and varied short stories, but, I suggest, such a study is now necessary. While the short story is a very different form from the novel, offering the reader quite a different literary experience, the approach I have taken may well lend itself to Taylor's short stories, in particular the search for the extraordinary in the everyday. Many of her stories can be described as distinctly challenging, if not in structure then in content, not least her 1969 story, 'The Fly-Paper', rejected by Bill Maxwell of *The New Yorker*, because too unsettling.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Taylor's desire to explore 'the strangeness in everyday people' is as apparent in her short stories as her novels – the scalpel is very evident within the kid glove. A critical work could not fail to prove a fruitful future development, deepening and broadening our knowledge of Taylor's oeuvre.

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<sup>3</sup> In 1995 Virago published *Dangerous Calm: The Selected Stories of Elizabeth Taylor*, edited by Lynn Knight, and in 2013 the complete short stories were published, including those previously unpublished, with a biographical introduction by Taylor's daughter, Joanna Kingham.

<sup>4</sup> Before Virago, Taylor's stories were published in *The New Yorker* and a wide variety of literary journals and women's magazines.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Clare Hanson, ed. *Re-Reading the Short Story* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989); Charles E. May, ed. *The New Short Story Theories* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994); Paul March-Russell, *The Short Story: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Beauman, *The Other Elizabeth Taylor*. p. 357. It is the story of a young girl trapped like a fly on a fly-paper by a deceptively ordinary couple intent on abducting, murdering or molesting her.



What is more, it would be sure to afford the scholar a literary journey as stimulating and compelling as the one I embarked upon in undertaking an analysis of Taylor's novels.

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