

Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München  
Department für Anglistik und Amerikanistik  
Sommersemester 2015  
A Room of their Own: Women Writers and Modernism  
Dozentin: Christa Fleps

“It's like an Apple Tree,  
One can't get past.”

(Adapted from Bowen, Elizabeth: *The Apple Tree*)

## The Haunted or the Guilt-Ridden

in two stories of the same name

by Elizabeth Bowen and Daphne du Maurier

Pascal Wagner  
Bachelor Anglistik/Rechtswissenschaften

## Table of Contents

	<b>Page</b>
1. Introduction	2
2. Bowen and the Shift to Horror	3
3. Du Maurier and the Power of One's Own Mind	5
4. Freud and the Inducement of Guilt	8
5. Conclusion	10
6. Bibliography	11

## 1. Introduction

The supernatural occurrences in the selected short stories of Elizabeth Bowen and Daphne du Maurier are a peculiar sight in the modernist literature both were part of. Bowen as well as du Maurier lived from the beginning of the twentieth century nearly to its end, a time in which the gothic influences on literature in general were gone. However, Bowen's *The Apple Tree* is in fact more exceptional than du Maurier's. Bowen in general focused her short stories on orderly life which is then confronted with secrets or pressure from something disrespected in society, forcing a change, a transformation. *The Apple Tree* generally fits into this, with the exception that this time the change-inducing force possesses supernatural aspects. Du Maurier's stories, in contrast, often share a common element of supernatural happenings or at least suspiciously non-rational occurrences – *The Birds* being a prime example of this.

So du Maurier is borrowing heavily from the gothic novel style of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while Bowen only occasionally does. Nevertheless they both are moving outside the traditional borders of their modernist literature genre, which raises the most obvious question: Why?

This can actually be answered by asking another question. Is it really haunting the characters in both short stories experience, or is it something more rational, maybe simple psychology? Both stories give hints in both directions while simultaneously raising their doubts. This text will certainly not clarify which one is the right interpretation. It will however try to shed light on how both possibilities are kept open for the reader. Furthermore, it will try to explain which psychological phenomenon could be at work if there would indeed be no supernatural influence.

## 2. Bowen and the Shift to Horror

Elizabeth Bowen's story, being the shorter one, shall be looked at first. The possibility of the supernatural is opened up right at the beginning. Simply through vocabulary, without anything suspicious happening, the reader gets a feeling of uneasiness. "Frightened?" (p. 461) is a rather unusual starting phrase for a story, and the following description of the memorial hall, "a rafted, charmless and icy building" (p. 461) is similar to typical gothic novel depictions of the scene. Furthermore, while there is nothing out of the order happening in about the first third of the short story, right up until Lancelot listens at the door, characters are compared to fantasy beasts twice. Mrs Betterley brings the term "werewolf" (p. 461) in association with Mrs Simon before it is revealed anything else about her; a rather dark base for further characterisation of Mrs Simon. And her husband Simon, in the night when Lancelot walks to the library, is depicted like an undead: Talking in a slow, clipped way ("You can't – come – in – here," p. 464) and being described as "once more human" (p. 465) after sobering up a bit.

On the same page, right after Lancelot notices the sound of apples falling, the tone even shifts from gothic novel influence to straight out horror story. The picture "entered his mind and remained, frightfully clear; [...] he thought he was going mad." could come straight out of a lovecraftian horror story with its focus on the despair and insanity Lancelot feels at that moment. It is at this moment that the reader is in his highest tension. This is getting prolonged because Mrs Betterley also feels something connected to the apple tree when she boldly enters the library where Mrs Simon is. After entering, she at first tries to console the young woman, but then exclaims in fear "One can't get past... it's like an apple tree." and rushes out.

The apple tree as a symbol of horror is essential for Mrs Simon or Myra Wing. Since the school where her former friend committed suicide cut down the tree after the incident and tried to erase the scene, Myra has to be one of very few people knowing that the girl hanged herself on an apple tree. Mrs Betterley seems to be very informed about the case, she knows the girl's age, where she was sent and what had happened to the school after the suicide (compare p. 462), so it might well be possible that she has been present or knows someone who has been. This means it is possible that she

knows about the apple tree, and the sight of Myra in the library just triggers her memory. However, Lancelot clearly has no idea what happened back then. In the same conversation Mrs Betterley reveals her knowledge, Lancelot reveals he knows nothing about it. "What – were they ill-treated?" he asks, "stuttering with excitement" (p. 462). He cannot know about the suicide or the apple tree. But still he connects the falling sound with apples, like Myra connects the sound of falling apples with looking up and seeing the dead body. Moreover, it is worded as if it is not Lancelot's mind finding this picture, but something that is planted into him: "This idea of apples entered his mind and remained, frightfully clear" (p. 465). Emphasized by the style of writing – the one compared to Lovecraft before - which follows directly, it is this part that gives the clearest hint towards supernatural influence. How can Lancelot know about Doria's place of death? Is Myra indeed "haunted" (p. 470) like she claims? She is convinced that the apple tree's roots "are in [her]. It takes all [her] strength" (p. 470). If that is true, this might not even be a unique thing in the universe of the short story. Mrs Betterley, after hearing out Myra, manages to "exorciz[e] the apple tree" (p. 470) by taking the girl with her on a journey. How she does it is not stated, but the fact that it is possible indicates some kind of experience present that someone could have used to help Myra Wing.

### 3. Du Maurier and the Power of One's Own Mind

In contrast to this, where one can find a rather clear clue towards something supernatural, Daphne du Maurier's *The Apple Tree* is presenting itself in a way that does not at all favour one or the other cause. The short story leaves it open at any time if the protagonist, who is only given his old, unwanted nickname Buzz, is haunted by his dead wife or if his mind is playing tricks on him while he experiences perfectly natural phenomena. It is very interesting that he himself never consciously connects the old, crooked apple tree with his wife Midge, or the young, green one with the girl he once kissed. The "fantastic freak resemblance" (p. 124) is only mentioned one time directly, when Buzz is shaken by shock because his gardener Willis mentions the old tree to him. All the time other than in this moment he avoids the thought of resemblance, maybe because it scares him, but at least because he finds it "indecent, blasphemous" (p. 124). Yet for the reader it is made very clear what connections his subconsciousness – or the ghost of his late wife, for that matter – is drawing by always following up the description of the new state of the tree with one of Midge's behaviours. This starts right at the beginning of the story, where he sees human posture in the old tree while thinking he "often [had] seen Midge stand like this" (p. 114). When he looks at the young apple tree right of the old one the first time, he remembers the farm girl, smiles (compare p. 122) and draws another very obvious comparison when describing her skin "like [that of] a very young apple." (p. 122) There are several where this happens, every time the old tree changes in some form, except for the first one, the buds it grows. Yet those buds could be connected to Buzz noticing the tree in the beginning, because his gardener tells him about them the same week, "[o]n Friday afternoon" (p. 123). He might have just not realised them consciously when looking out the window.

The drawn connection is most obvious in the case of the broken branch. The branch, which mysteriously falls down from the tree that otherwise starts to show signs of life again, is sawed up by Willis and put into the fireplace for Buzz. Willis himself takes a piece of the wood home and burns it, seemingly enjoying it because apple wood smells good (compare p. 138). Yet for Buzz the wood burns with a "sickly rancid smell" (p. 128), a

“[s]weetish, strange” (p.137) aroma that stems from the burning sap, which is “unpleasant [and] slimy” (p. 129). Du Maurier is making the connotation with blood very obvious here. Burning the logs is like burning Midge's body to Buzz, and only to Buzz, because neither Willis nor the maid can smell anything out of the ordinary. The wood even stops burning; it is looking “like the bones of someone darkened and dead by fire.” (p. 131) It makes him nauseous and leads him to flee the living room, which then “remind[s] him of the old days” (p. 129) where he would pretend to write letters in the study so he would not have to bear Midge's presence. Buzz even scolds himself for this: “Now he was doing the same thing, all over again, because of the apple logs.” (p. 129)

But is there really something wrong with the wood? It is indeed not burning well, because the charred logs, after Buzz throws them out of the house, are still solid enough so the neighbour's horse trips over them (compare p. 137). But they might have been just wet from sap and dew. No one else could smell the rancid odour, only Buzz. And the next morning it is revealed that Buzz had a full bottle of whisky that night, possibly the cause for his nausea. He might “ha[ve] done himself too well” (p. 132), making him see things because of his obsession with Midge and the tree. He has, after all, a lot of remorse because of her. If it is because he kissed the young girl, or because of his other bad behaviour – going to the cinema when Midge is ill (compare p. 120) and leaving her alone in the living room, for example – is not stated, but we can assume that it is a combination of every unjust behaviour he showed to Midge before her death. He even comes close to the realisation, when he admits that the tree was “a perpetual reminder of the fact that he... well, he was blessed if he knew what...” (p. 144), then throws away the thought again.

Whether it is Buzz's mind or Midge's ghost that haunts the man, it makes him such an unpleasant employer that the maid quits her job and Willis seems to have the same intention. This is another strike against Buzz's conscience, because when the maid quits she tells him that only Midge appreciated her work and how she does not like it when Buzz leaves the house unattended for so long (compare p. 148). And in the end, after he finally cuts down the tree and gifts it to the owner of his favourite pub, the

suppressed remorse then becomes a clear feeling of regret. When Buzz' car is not moving in the snow and he has to walk home, he remembers that the house is empty and he regrets the loneliness (compare p. 158). He does not think about his wife in particular, he just wants someone to be there, to light the fire and to worry about him. It is this selfishness that at least brings him to confess that he is alone, and that he made the matter worse in loosing the daily woman. He still does not want to see, however, that his wife is who might miss, if only to talk to her about his bad conscience, and if we look for the supernatural in the story, this might be the final straw that Midge's ghost needs to kill him. Because when Buzz steps into the garden in an attempt to caress the young tree that now stands alone, his foot entangles in the roots of the chopped down old tree. He falls down and cannot free himself, knowing that no one will find him until morning, when he will be frozen to death (compare p. 159). Buzz now completely perceives the remains of the tree as a person, shouting at it "Let me go" and when he finally gives up and lays down his head, the brushwood touching his mouth feels like a hand to him: Midge's hand that draws him into the darkness to her.

Of course, we might as well assume that it is just an accident when Buzz falls and entangles his foot. Nothing except for his own perception gives hints towards a haunting of the tree in the whole story. No one else notices the bad smell of the burning wood, or the rotten taste of the apples the tree produces aplenty (compare p. 142f). While Willis refers to the old apple tree as a "she" (p. 138) as well, this might be due to his position as the gardener and his special relationship to the plants he tends to. The only times the tree gets clear human features is when Buzz looks at it, and they are all negative; the "attitude of weariness" (p. 114), the "agony" (p. 144) it must feel when it is laden with fruit, the hand that grabs him when he is caught in the roots. These features all might come from his own mind; from a guilt-ridden husband that secretly regrets what he has done yet does not admit even after haunting himself with the picture of her in the tree every single day.

#### 4. Freud and the Inducement of Guilt

Now if we assume that both cases derive from the psyche of the affected persons – for we cannot explain the supernatural, but we can surely try to explain a psychological progress – how come the mind can have such devastating influence on their lives and that of the people around them? As implied in the previous parts, both Myra Wing and Buzz are affected by a feeling of guilt. Myra feels she killed Doria by leaving her for nicer friends, and also feels guilty for hiding that she had seen the body on the tree. Buzz is ashamed for how he treated Midge by fleeing from her presence and committing adultery by kissing the farm girl. While Myra openly admits to Mrs Betterley how guilty she feels, Buzz is hiding it even from himself, making it only clear to the reader through the thoughts his mind draws whenever he connects the apple tree to Midge.

But why would those regrets affect both of them so much that they effectively destroy themselves if nobody helps them? For this, a look into Sigmund Freud's "Civilization and its Discontents" might help. In it Freud defines and explains the concept of guilt in a way that perfectly fits both of the short stories. In fact, he divides it into two separate forms of guilt, one being the "fear of an authority", the other one being the "fear of the super-ego" (p. 74). Both protagonists do not have an authority to fear – Buzz is a wealthy, respected man, and Myra was just a child when it happened - so we can rule out the first form. The second one, the fear of the super-ego however, is much more fitting. Both forms take place because one either does something which they know to be 'bad' or have the intention to do anything 'bad', with 'bad' being defined by the social standards they are raised with. This could possibly lead to the "loss of love" (p. 71) of other people they are depending on if discovered. But since people developed a super-ego, or conscience, which is in their mind and thus has insight on their every thought, the need to be discovered disappears; every mind has its own authority in the form of the super-ego (compare p. 71f). To make up for the bad deed the super-ego has perceived, it is looking for punishment, because after being punished one is 'cleaned from his sin', to use religious terms. This simply means that punishment is the preferred substitute for the loss of love, the fear that is embedded in the super-ego (compare p. 72). But as

previously said, who would punish Buzz and Myra? Thus, both of them have to seek to punish themselves. Myra tortures herself with the picture of Doria on the apple tree night after night, and Buzz projects Midge's image on the tree he despises suffers whenever he is around something that comes from this particular tree. Both torture themselves mentally to make up for the lack of punishment from outside they would have to receive in order to process their guilt and live on. In the case of Buzz, we even see another amplifying factor. To quote Freud directly (p. 73):

As long as things go well with a man, his conscience is lenient and lets the ego do all sorts of things; but when misfortune befalls him, he searches his soul, acknowledges his sinfulness, heightens the demands of his conscience, imposes abstinences on himself and punishes himself with penances.

As Buzz's irritation with the apple tree grows, his guilt deepens. When at first he just notices the tree and does not care much for the buds, the smell of the burning wood makes him nauseous next and in the end he is so full of fear and anger that he chops down the tree – which leads to the ultimate punishment one could impose on themselves: Death. Freud ascribes this to an “infantile stage of conscience” (p. 73) that connects the loss of fortune with the loss of love from a higher authority. Fate is taking the place of the “parental agency”. This makes Buzz more susceptible for his super-ego's urge for punishment, thus punishing himself harder the more misfortune he imposes on himself.

## 5. Conclusion

Still we cannot define completely sure if both *The Apple Tree* stories are about supernatural occurrences or about guilt that can destroy a life. Both du Maurier and Bowen left this question open quite deliberately. Bowen's story seems to lean towards haunting as the cause for Myra's suffering, yet it might still just be coincidence that Lancelot compared the sound he heard with falling apples; in this case it would be perfectly reasonable to explain Myra's state of fear with Freud's definition of guilt. Du Maurier's story is leaving both sides completely open. If one is fond of Freud's interpretation of misfortune amplifying guilt, they could say that du Maurier's *The Apple Tree* is indeed a story specifically focused on psychology. While there can be no definite answer, it can at least be stated that both occurrences are possible to be perfectly natural. This is remarkable because both stories, on first reading them, can easily appear to be very clear ghost stories, especially with du Maurier's usual topics in mind. Yet both stories possess a deeper level of thought which can be revealed by analysis, and even if all psychological assumptions in both *Apple Trees* are just theoretical: They still give evidence on how thoughtful and intelligently calculating such two-layered stories can be.

## 6. Bibliography

### **Literary sources:**

Bowen, Elizabeth. First published 1934. "The Apple Tree". *Collected Stories*. London: Vintage. 1999. Pages 461-470.

du Maurier, Daphne. First published 1952. "The Apple Tree". *The Birds & Other Stories*. London: Virago Press. 2004. Pages 114-159.

Freud, Sigmund. 1962. *Civilization and its Discontents*. Translator: James Strachey. New York: Norton Company Inc.

### **Websources:**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth\\_Bowen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Bowen) (last visited August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daphne\\_du\\_Maurier](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daphne_du_Maurier) (last visited August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2015)