5 The Death of the Heart

The Death of the Heart, published four years after The House in Paris, is considered by many to be Bowen’s crowning achievement. Acclaimed for its contemporary treatment of the theme of innocence and disenchantment, Bowen’s sixth novel traces the egocentric needs of child and adult as they are transformed into a recognition of mutual interdependence. The Death of the Heart is different from the earlier novels. Dispensing with gothic, mythic, and romance motifs, with mysterious, unexplained events, Bowen creates a realistic domestic novel of manners, using conventions of verisimilitude, multi-dimensional character, and forays into the characters’ pasts through their own fully conscious recollections. An ensemble of characters forms the intertwined quests of a young girl for love, a family home and a sense of herself and of a married woman who resists such goals. Bowen portrays everyone in this work as capable of giving verbal expression to an understanding of those forces which paralyse characters in earlier works. This novel is composed of a process by which one woman on the brink of self-discovery and another who has lost her sense of herself free themselves from a haunting past by becoming interdependent. As Anna Quayne reads about herself in the diary of her sixteen-year-old ward, Portia, the two women negotiate the ground between daughterhood and motherhood. In doing so, they change the course of the domestic novel. In Bowen’s hands, it is now about female character shaping herself in her acts of writing and interpretation.

More than any of the novels which precede it, The Death of the Heart suggests the possibility of change through the recognition that difference is integral to likeness. Enacted between two women set in opposition to each other, this
recognition becomes a decisive move leading to an attempt at reconciliation between mother and daughter figures. For the first time in Bowen’s fiction, female characters seize their own volition to make themselves the determining figures in a domestic novel. At the end, as they are about to meet each other at least half-way, the domestic novel has been wrested away from an enfeebled patriarchy and reinvigorated by women’s interdependent stories.

Structuring the novel so that female characters are agents of their own doing and undoing leads Bowen to treat houses differently as well. Bearing no relation to a determining past, houses here do not embody family or cultural histories which provide clues to the meaning of characters’ lives. Interestingly, there are no country estates in this novel to become elaborate symbolic structures. Instead, houses are the sum of the characters’ discomforts in the present. In this way, the carefully ordered London town house, Windsor Terrace, and the chaotic seaside villa, Waikiki, reveal how homes and characters create each other. Bowen’s realistic method also shifts her study of character. Portia’s quest through the houses in which she finds neither answers nor love, shows that self-determination, the key to effecting change, must include full recognition and understanding of the past as well as responsibility for whatever one is in the process of becoming. In previous Bowen novels, the past paralysed women who found no way to deal with its patriarchal codes. In this work, the past is kept alive by a woman who fully understands its price – the aptly placed Quayne’s housekeeper, Matchett. In addition to her relentless care of the furniture, Matchett takes care to remind Portia of the past Windsor Terrace is designed to ignore. Offering queries to the child as Mme Fisher did for Leopold, Matchett is unique in her success. For Portia is then given to question her life in the form that was liberating for her creator. She uses writing as a form of self-reflection and expression. As she sees the emptiness of