A Day in the Dark Study Guide

A Day in the Dark by Elizabeth Bowen

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

Introduction

"A Day in the Dark" was first published in the journal *Botteghe Oscure* in 1955 and later in a collection of Elizabeth Bowen's short stories in 1965. Bowen gave the title of the collection the same name as the story, which she placed at the very end as an important closing statement to the work. "A Day in the Dark," considered a "timeless gem" by many readers including F. L. H. Jr. in his review of the collection, focuses on one afternoon in the life of a fifteen-year-old girl in a small town on the west coast of Ireland. What she learns that day forever changes her perspective on the relationships between men and women.

Barbie sets out to ask Miss Banderry, a descendent of one of the town's wealthiest families, a favor for her uncle, for whom she feels an innocent but powerful love. During her conversation with Miss Banderry, however, Barbie learns of the darker side of human passions, which fills her with a sense of dread. By the end of the story, she recognizes that she cannot retreat into the safety of her childhood beliefs after being indoctrinated into the complexities of the adult world.

Author Biography

Elizabeth Bowen was an only child, born in Dublin, Ireland, on June 7, 1899 to Henry Cole Bowen and Florence Colley Brown. Her father worked in the law and this kept the family between their two homes in Ireland, one in Dublin and another in Bowen's Court, her family house in County Cork. Bowen had a happy childhood until 1905, when her father had a nervous breakdown. Due to her father's long convalescence for the next several years, a family physician recommended that Elizabeth and her mother go stay with various aunts in England. Bowen's father recovered from his breakdown when Elizabeth was 12. However, her happiness at the family being reunited was short-lived since her mother died of cancer the following year. Her sense of displacement and loss of innocence as a result of her parent's death became major themes in her work.

After her mother's death, Bowen was sent to Downe House, a boarding school in Kent, England, where she stayed for the next three years. She wrote a great deal of short stories at Downe House, and decided this was what she was meant to do. Bowen was able to get started with her career as a writer partly due to Rose Macaulay, a friend who attended Downe House and who introduced her to influential editors and publishers.

Encounters, her first volume of short stories, was published in 1923. The same year, Bowen married assistant secretary for education in Northampton, Alan Charles Cameron. Bowen was soon immersed in the intellectual atmosphere of Oxford, due to her husband's promotion to secretary of education for that city.

Over the next several decades, Bowen's literary output was prolific. She published several novels, including *The Hotel* (1927), *The Last September* (1929), *Friends and Relations* (1931), and *To the North* (1932). Her literary reputation was firmly established with the publication of *The House in Paris* in 1935, *The Death of the Heart* in 1938 and *The Heat of the Day* in 1948. She also published collections of short fiction, including *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (1945), and *A Day in the Dark and Other Stories* (1965).

In 1935, Bowen moved with her husband to Regent's Park in London, where she wrote essays for several journals, including the *Tatler*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *Harpers*, and the *Saturday Review of Literature*. During this time, she was also the associate editor of *London Magazine*. Bowen incorporated the subject of World War II in much of her writing. She was an Air Raid Precautions warden during the war, and she and Cameron often suffered through bombing raids in Regent's Park, which gave her firsthand exposure to the war. Bowen continued to write after the war. Her most well-received work was *Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes*, which earned her the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1970. On February 22, 1973, Elizabeth Bowen died of lung cancer at her home at Hythe, England.

Plot Summary

"A Day in the Dark" is set in Moher, a town on the west coast of Ireland. The story is narrated by Barbie, who looks back on herself as a fifteen year-old-girl and begins this story with a description of a row of houses under the bridge and the center of her town□its intermingling of houses with a "faded air of importance" and a main street that "prospers." She then turns to a history of Miss Banderry, one of the last of a once prominent family. Miss Banderry, who now owns some property and a profitable farm nearby, had insisted on getting half of the profits of the family mills, which eventually drove her "hopeless" brother to suicide. The narrator's uncle has had "dealings" with Miss Banderry and the two have fallen "into talk," especially about magazine and journal articles that she gave him to read.

One afternoon, the narrator pays Miss Banderry a visit to return a magazine and to ask if her uncle can borrow a farming tool from her. She has thought to bring some roses for her, which she pretends are from her uncle. At the door, she meets Mrs. Banderry's widowed niece, Nan, who informs Barbie that her aunt is resting and instructs her to wait. As Barbie passes the time, she notes the interior of the house, "peopled" with portraits of generations of Banderrys. She also examines her "thin" reflection in a mirror, with "no sign yet of a figure."

When Mrs. Banderry finally arrives, she appears disappointed that Barbie's uncle has not come himself. She begins bantering with Barbie, insisting to the girl, "I hear wonders of you," which Barbie recognizes is a lie. Mrs. Banderry pretends that she believes that Barbie's uncle has sent the flowers and thanks for the magazine he had borrowed. When she notices the marks on the magazine, she tries to embarrass Barbie by suggesting that her uncle reads during meals, obviously ignoring his niece. Yet, she immediately counters the stinging comment with "Oh, I'm sure you're a great companion for him."

Barbie imagines that Mrs. Banderry can read her thoughts and emotions, fearing that the woman will discover her love for her uncle. Her thoughts about him have been innocent: "There was not a danger till she spoke."

When Mrs. Banderry tries to conclude the visit, Barbie admits that her uncle wants to again borrow a farming tool. This point upsets the woman who calls him a "brute" and insists, "Time after time, it's the same story." When she declares that she does not like to lend out machinery, Barbie responds haughtily that she will relay the message to her uncle. At this, Mrs. Banderry reconsiders and says that she will think about it and teases that she might agree and she might not. She then returns her attention to Barbie. After a close examination of the girl, she concludes that her uncle should not "hide behind" her skirts, suggesting that he should have come himself. Barbie insists that her uncle is too busy to come that day.

Barbie's memory of the conversation stops after Mrs. Banderry compares Barbie's uncle to her dead brother. The narrator shifts to the present when she is older and more

informed; she refuses to fill in any details about the woman that she later gained, insisting that she describe only what she experienced that day from her fifteen-year-old and innocent perspective. She understands that the woman felt an ambivalent "amorous hostility" toward her uncle but questions its cause. Barbie insists that she and her uncle felt no guilt about their relationship that summer, that they "did each other no harm." They "played house together on the margin of a passion which was impossible."

Barbie returns to her memories of that afternoon, relating that she left Mrs. Banderry's home with a little "ceremony," accepting a "thimble glass" of raspberry cordial. As she leaves, Nan asks her "conspiratorially" if she is going to meet her uncle. Barbie admits that she does not know he is in town and that she has planned to take the bus home. After practically shoving her out of the door, Nan watches Barbie as she walks away from the house.

As Barbie walks into town, she sees her uncle's car parked near the hotel. She searches for the bus that will grant her "independence" but discovers it has already departed. Her visit with Mrs. Banderry seems to have changed her attitude toward her uncle, of whom she thinks, she "did not want to be bothered." She feels people watching her from the shops as she walks toward the hotel. As she watches her uncle standing on the porch, she determines that "he was not a lord, only a landowner." He appears to have not been waiting for her. When the two meet at his car he asks how her meeting has gone, whether "the old terror" has eaten her. He is relieved that Miss Banderry has not sent him another magazine. The story ends as he touches Barbie's elbow, reminding her to get in the car.

Characters

Miss Banderry

Given the status her family once held in the town of Moher, Miss Banderry is most likely Anglo-Irish, a group in Ireland that made up the governing class. Her family was in the milling business and owned a profitable farm nearby. After her brother lost control of the family mills, she gained ownership of all the homes in the terrace, some property in another part of town, as well as a profitable farm. Although she is probably one of the wealthiest inhabitants of Moher, her house has a "faded air of importance." Presumably, she has lost the power her family once had when Barbie describes the oil portraits that hang from the walls of her home, depicting the "vanished Banderrys."

Her controlling, selfish nature becomes evident in her treatment of her "hopeless" brother, who sold the family business. After she demanded her share of the profits, he was unable to meet his debts and hanged himself. Later in the story, she callously compares him to Barbie's uncle, insisting that the two were quite "busy" men, ignoring the fact that she drove her brother to suicide.

Aware of her advancing years, she tries desperately to convince others that she is still desirable, as when she greets Barbie with a "racy, indulgent smile, to counteract the impression she knew she gave." She continues to insinuate that she and Barbie's uncle have an intimate relationship by insisting when she sees his thumbprints on her magazine, "I'd know *those* anywhere!" Later, she suggests, with distinctly sexual undertones as she "rub[s] her palms on her thighs," that Barbie's uncle often asks her for favors, referring to him as "my lord" and insisting that he must come to her himself.

She also cruelly taunts Barbie, whom she realizes is in love with her uncle. At times she plays along with the game as Barbie pretends to offer her tokens of her uncle's affection. Just as quickly, though, she tries to undermine Barbie and her uncle's relationship by insinuating that Barbie is too young and inexperienced to maintain his attention.

Barbie

Fifteen-year-old Barbie has an innocent view of love before she goes to visit Miss Banderry. When she meets her, she is "unread," her "susceptibilities were virgin." She admits that she is in love with her uncle, and so will do what she can to "stand between him and trouble." Whenever Miss Banderry tries to attack his character, she defends him, even if it means she must lie to her. Barbie describes her feelings for her uncle as a slow process of transition, like beech trees turning from pink to purple. She is the one who sits in his chair and watches "the lassitude of his hand hanging caressing a dog's ear."

Miss Banderry's insinuations about her own relationship with the uncle as well as Barbie's, however, soon fill Barbie with dread and make her reevaluate her views on male/female interaction. Miss Banderry makes her feel defensive about her relationship with her uncle, so much so that she twice swears that she felt no guilt about their feelings for each other. Later, though she admits that they "played house together on the margin of a passion which was impossible" and that "convention was [their] safeguard," suggesting a certain danger.

She continues to feel a sense of danger and dread when she leaves Miss Banderry's, feelings that are reinforced by the appearance of her uncle at the hotel. Barbie longs to return to the innocence she felt before that afternoon but recognizes that she cannot get "out of reach" of the risks of sexuality. When her uncle touches her elbow as she gets into the car, she crosses over into the darker world of experience.

Nan

The widowed Nan is Miss Banderry's niece, who greets Barbie at the door of her aunt's house and shows her out at the end of the visit. She reinforces the dark, cynical view of sexuality that her aunt relates to Barbie. Nan, "ready to be handsome, wore a cheated ravenous look." While Nan waits for her inheritance from her aunt, the older woman has reduced her into servitude. Nan scoffs at the "overblown" roses that Barbie brings and doubts that they came from her uncle.

Apparently Nan makes it her business to know everyone else's. She tells Barbie that her uncle is at the hotel, thinking that he is waiting to drive home his niece, glancing "conspiratorially" at the girl. Nan claims that Barbie is "mad" for not wanting to ride home with her uncle.

Uncle

Most of the information readers gain about Barbie's uncle comes from her discussions with Nan and Miss Banderry. He does not actually appear until the end of the story. He obviously relies on Barbie, as she appears used to standing "between him and trouble." The "winning, versatile and when necessary inventive talker" appears to be a charmer, who likes having relationships with women but hates "to tax his brain."

Barbie had felt comfortable in her relationship with him until her visit with Miss Banderry. She recognizes that he was fond of her companionship. After Miss Banderry's cynical insinuations about her uncle, Barbie feels a sense of danger about her relationship with him that she had not previously felt. This danger is reinforced when she meets him after her afternoon with Miss Banderry. Her uncle has been at the hotel, and Nan suggests "conspiratorially" that he may have been waiting there for Barbie. His surprise when he sees her, however, indicates that he was at the hotel for another reason, perhaps a secret assignation since he never explains to Barbie what he is doing there. He appears almost sinister at the end of the story as he touches her elbow as she gets in the car.

Themes

Innocence and Experience

In "Day in the Dark," Bowen presents a version of the conflict between innocence and experience. The innocents in the story are not necessarily pure, and the experienced become sinister. Barbie arrives at Miss Banderry's with an innocent heart, firmly believing that her love for her uncle is above reproach. But during her conversation with Miss Banderry, she begins to view her uncle and his relationship with her as well as others as potentially "dangerous."

Miss Banderry is a "formidable reader" of human nature. She immediately understands that Barbie's uncle has sent his niece to gain a favor from her and that Barbie has played a part in this deceptive game. Barbie willingly agrees to deceive Miss Banderry with her offering of roses because she is trying to protect her uncle, with whom she has fallen in love.

After listening to Miss Banderry's insinuations about the nature of Barbie's relationship with her uncle, Barbie becomes defensive, asserting to herself that she has no reason to feel guilty about it. Part of the narrative suggests that there has been no physical contact between Barbie and her uncle, but Barbie admits that the two of them "played house together on the margin of a passion which was impossible.

Miss Banderry introduces Barbie into the adult world of sexuality with her intimations concerning her own relationship with Barbie's uncle. Miss Banderry is also guilty of deceit as Barbie catches her "dealing the lie to me like a card" when she accepts the roses and reports that she has heard good things about Barbie. Miss Banderry, Barbie claims, "took a long voluptuous sniff at [the roses], as though deceiving herself as to their origin□showing me she knew how to play the game." The game becomes more sinister as Miss Banderry talks about Barbie's uncle, calling him both a "brute" and "my lord," and complaining about "what blows in off his dirty land." Ironically, while she is trying to assert her influence over Barbie's uncle, Miss Banderry is warning the girl about the dangers women face in their relationships with men.

Barbie feels a sense of betrayal after she leaves Miss Banderry's and sees her uncle at the hotel, which appears to confirm Miss Banderry's dark vision of him. Barbie has sacrificed her innocence in the process as she "sacrificed a hair ribbon to tie the roses." She sees her uncle as "all carriage and colouring" when he is "finished with the hotel." By the end of the story, she has discovered that "he was not a lord, only a landowner."

Guilt

Barbie swears twice that she feels no guilt about her relationship with her uncle. Yet she admits feeling that people are spying on her, which seems to contradict her assertion. Before she arrives at Miss Banderry's house, she imagines that the vines on the terrace

"leaned on the balustrade spying down upon [her], or so [she] thought." This initial sense of guilt may be a result of her involvement in her uncle's deceitful game with Miss Banderry.

After her visit with Miss Banderry, however, Barbie's guilt emerges from a darker source: her reexamination of her relationship with her uncle. She feels Nan watching her walk down the street to the hotel where her uncle is. As she walks, she insists, "people started to come to the shop doors in order to look at me in amazement. They knew who I was and where he was. . . . They speculated." As she looks for the bus to take her home, she feels that the people watching her are wondering, "what should *I* be wanting to catch the bus for?" Barbie longs to escape to the innocence of her past but she recognizes that the bus that would have taken her there is now "out of reach," and so she allows her uncle to help her into his car.

Style

Point of View

In his review of *A Day in the Dark*, Edwin Morgan writes, "in this rich selection of her short stories the communication is often an ambiguity or a mystery which the imagination of the reader must try to unravel or complete." One way Bowen accomplishes this is by relating the plot through the narrator's limited point of view. Barbie tells the story as an adult but refuses to add any details that she did not observe or conclusions she did not make during that afternoon. At one point, she claims that memory has failed her and that she has lost half of her conversation with Miss Banderry. This truncated version forces readers to think about omitted parts of the experience and ambiguous parts of the story, like Barbie's sense of danger and dread. Yet this narrative technique provides a truer portrait of Barbie's experience, that of a young girl confronted with disturbing realities and trying to make sense of them.

Setting

Bowen's vivid descriptions of the setting provides meaning that deepens readers' understanding of the story. In his review of her collection of short stories, F. L. H. quotes Bowen as writing (in the Preface to her collection of short stories): "On the whole, places more often than faces have sparked off stories. To be honest, the scenes have been before me before the characters." She spends a good deal of time in "A Day in the Dark" setting the scene in which Barbie learns about the complex adult world she is to enter.

In the beginning of the story, Bowen juxtaposes images of life, transition, and decay, suggesting the movement from innocence to experience, which becomes the story's main theme. The opening image is one of transition, of one coming over the bridge and seeing the "faded air of importance" that characterizes the terrace, where, appropriately, Miss Banderry lives, and nearby the ruined castle. Barbie is literally the one in transition, as she walks from the prosperous town square to Miss Banderry's faded house, where she is to lose her innocent vision of the relationships between men and women. Also, the castle juxtaposed with the row houses under the bridge suggest the transition in generations of Miss Banderry's Anglo-Irish ancestors, who were themselves land lords (literally lords over the land worked by poor Irish laborers) and later became merely owners of the land.

Bowen also makes good use of interior details in Miss Banderry's house, decorated with pictures of ancestors and a stopped clock. In the parlor where Barbie waits, she has the chance to inspect herself in the mirror at the beginning of an afternoon in which she is forced to reexamine her relationship with her uncle. Nan notes that the roses Barbie brings are "overblown" and did not "travel well" as they drop petals on the doorstep. Miss Banderry, of course, recognizes the lie when she grabs them "thorns and all" and

begins the malicious game she plays with Barbie. The roses are an apt symbol of Barbie's situation. Traditionally roses are given as a token of affection, and they can be used to suggest sexuality. But these are past their prime and thorny. By dropping their petals, they suggest the loss of Barbie's sexual innocence; their thorns suggest the thorny lie she is obliged to act out. Barbie's innocent vision of love, like the petal-dropping roses, dies as Miss Banderry introduces Barbie into the adult realities of relationships. The knowledge Barbie gains is later symbolized by "the copper beeches" that surround the house she and her uncle live in that summer "turning from pink to purple," colors that suggest a transformation from bright innocent affection to dark physical passion.

At the end of the story, Bowen uses setting details to further illuminate Barbie's transition. She becomes as powerless as the paper boat the river carries away, "traveling at uncertain speed on the current, list[ing] as it vanished under the bridge." She does not have "the heart to wonder how the boat would fare." But readers may well wonder how Barbie will fare. When she sees her uncle at the hotel, her impulse is to escape. Here the bus becomes the symbol of her freedom from this adult world. She longs to take the bus back to "scenes of safety . . . and solitude." But the innocence of that world is past; a means of escape is "out of reach."

Historical Context

The Decline of the Big Houses

After civil war broke out in Ireland in 1921, ancestral homes known as Big Houses went into decline. They were owned by the Anglo-Irish, British Protestants who made up the occupation governing class in Ireland and who had taken the land away from the Irish Catholics. During the war, many of these homes, like Bowen's Court, Elizabeth Bowen's family estate, were either taken over by soldiers or destroyed by anti-British mobs who regarded them as symbols of social and economic oppression.

Richard Tillinghast, in his article on Bowen, writes that she "was born into a Protestant ascendancy that rose to power and distinction in the eighteenth century and went into decline by the late nineteenth." Tillinghast reveals the influence this movement had on her when he concludes, "The alienation of the Anglo-Irish landowner, set above and isolated from the 'native' population, is a vantage point to which Bowen refers often when writing of Ireland."

In 1903 the Wyndham Act was passed in Ireland, which helped displaced Catholics buy back their lands from the Anglo-Irish. By the second decade of the twentieth century, landlords who had sold off their farms were left with not much more than their big houses. The wealth they had accumulated from the sale of their lands left them with little to occupy their time in a place where they felt a growing sense of isolation.

Girls and Sexuality in Ireland

A celebrated 2003 film *The Magdalene Sisters* depicts the harrowing consequences for Irish girls who experimented with sex during the first half of the twentieth century. Girls who became pregnant or engaged in sexual activities were often handed over to the Catholic Church by their families. Some of them ended up in convents that turned them literally into slaves, working in laundries or other money-making operations. The film paints a bleak picture of convent life, in which it claims the girls were brutalized.

Sexuality in the 1950s

Traditional attitudes about sex began to change during this era. Still heavily influenced by the church, the Irish tried to encourage the young to refrain from sexual experimentation. But new attitudes in America began to filter into the Irish culture. Alfred Kinsey's reports on the sexual behavior of men and women (1948, 1953) helped bring discussions of this subject out in the open in the United States and overseas. Although many Irish clung to oppressive Catholic ideas about sexuality, they could not suppress questions that began to be raised about what constituted normal or abnormal sexual behavior.

Movie stars such as Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot, who openly flaunted their sexuality, intrigued the public on both sides of the Atlantic and magazines like *Playboy*, begun in 1953, gained a wide audience. In the 1960s relaxed moral standards resulted in an age of sexual freedom in Europe and the United States. Yet, most Irish in the 1950s retained conservative attitudes toward sexuality: they did not openly discuss sexual behavior, and promiscuity, especially for women, was not tolerated.

Critical Overview

"A Day in the Dark" was first published in the journal *Botteghe Oscure* in 1955. It appeared in *Mademoiselle* magazine in 1957 and then became the title story in Bowen's 1965 collection of short stories. In a review of that collection, F. L. H. Jr. praises Bowen's detailed descriptions of setting, concluding that "Miss Bowen carries over a novelistic technique to her short stories." Many other scholars have applauded Bowen's attention to detail in these stories, including Edwin Morgan who writes in his review of *A Day in the Dark* that in this "rich selection of her short stories," "Miss Bowen shows again and again her skill in evoking atmosphere, weather, gardens, houses, brooding human feelings." He also finds a strong connection between place and the "convincing psychological realism" of her stories. Echoing this conclusion, Laurel Smith, in her article on Bowen in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* determines that "Bowen unobtrusively steers readers through the geography of motives and interactions on which human identity and human character depend."

Turning to "A Day in the Dark," F. L. H. Jr. insists that the story is "a timeless gem about a girl's recognition of the complexities of love." In her article on the story, Lis Christensen claims that it "has been hailed as a Bowen classic." She echoes the positive reviews of the collection when she notes "the dominant role played by rooms and houses and landscapes" in the story. She also praises the story's narrative voice, commenting that "The handling of the narrator provides a degree of ambivalence and complexity . . . that places it among the most sophisticated of Elizabeth Bowen's writings." F. L. H. Jr. illustrates the appeal of this collection and specifically of "A Day in the Dark" with the conclusion that "It's great to be a reader in the same world in which Elizabeth Bowen writes."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Perkins is a professor of American and English literature and film. In this essay, Perkins examines the theme of innocence and experience in the story.

Laurel Smith, in her article in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, notes that the central concerns in Bowen's short stories are "the complex truths of human relationships." In one of her most poignant stories, "A Day in the Dark," Bowen explores the complex truths in the relationships a fifteen year-old Irish girl has with her uncle and a woman in her town. Barbie's interactions with these two influential figures in her young life cause her to discover the darker nature of sexuality and so to be initiated into the realities of the adult world.

Angus Wilson, in his introduction to *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*, concludes that Bowen's best stories focus on the "never changing conflict of youth's hopeful imagination and the regretful doubts of the ageing." In "A Day in the Dark," Bowen alters this conflict a bit to one between "hopeful imagination" and a cynical vision of the adult world. Barbie's and Miss Banderry's conflicting visions center on the issue of sexuality. On the afternoon of her visit Barbie admits that she is in love with her uncle, exclaiming, "with him I felt the tender bond of sex." Since she had not known him when she was a child, she came upon his "manhood" without warning. She had not felt any danger in their relationship, "growing into love . . . like the grass growing into hay on his uncut lawns." Not at least until she visits Miss Banderry that day.

Barbie makes the trip for her uncle, who needs to return a magazine and borrow a farming implement. She insists that he has evaded meetings with Miss Banderry because although "a winning, versatile and when necessary inventive talker, fundamentally [he] hated to tax his brain," and Miss Banderry liked to discuss reading material that she often sent him. Barbie is hopeful that she can successfully perform the favor for her uncle and so brings roses as a gift.

She approaches the house with some trepidation, the cause of which is not immediately apparent. Perhaps it is due to her knowledge of Miss Banderry's hounding of her brother to the point of suicide or perhaps it is due to her understanding that her uncle has a certain relationship with the older woman. Bowen's subtle and indirect narrative style often forces the reader to follow barely detectable suggestions of plot line and character development. Soon after Barbie arrives, however, she confronts the complex realities of adult relationships, which will fill her with a sense of "dread."

Looking back from adulthood, Barbie admits that when she went to Miss Banderry's, she was "unread, [her] susceptibilities were virgin." Her innocence is immediately challenged by Nan, Miss Banderry's dependent niece, who "bets" that the "overblown" roses have not come from Barbie's uncle. The widowed Nan is a "regretful, doubting" older woman like the ones to whom Wilson refers. "[R]eady to be handsome," Nan "wore a cheated ravenous look" as she waits for her inheritance, since she has no other opportunities.

Nan's response exposes Barbie to the complex games that men and women often play, prompting her to acknowledge that her uncle "*had* never thought of the roses. He had commissioned me to be gallant for him any way I chose." He had insisted, "She'll be mad . . . . Better say it was you." Her love for him, however, remains unshaken for she "sacrifices a hair ribbon to tie the roses" because "it rejoices [her] to stand between him and trouble." She again expresses her love when she wonders, "how dared [Nan] speak of my uncle with her bad breath?"

Miss Banderry will soon challenge that innocent love with her subtle treacheries and manipulations. Bowen refuses to make the relationship between Barbie's uncle and Miss Banderry clear since she relates it through the eyes of an inexperienced fifteen-year-old, but the older woman implies that at least from her point of view, there is a sexual tension between the two. She views the young girl as a threat to her relationship with the uncle as she indoctrinates Barbie into the darker side of human desires.

Before the two meet, Barbie observes the portraits of the "vanishing Banderrys" and the stopped clock, which suggest Miss Banderry's faded youth. Yet when Barbie becomes self-conscious under their gaze and so inspects herself in the mirror, she sees, "A tall girl in a sketchy cotton dress. Arms thin, no sign yet of a figure," not yet a woman. When Miss Banderry arrives, she continues the inspection, exclaiming "so he sent *you*, did he?" and sits down "the better to look at" her. Aware of her aged "angry" appearance, Miss Banderry, pastes a "racy, indulgent smile" on her face and begins her banter with Barbie concerning their relationship with Barbie's uncle. Miss Banderry's obvious regrets over her lost youth prompt her attacks on the girl, whom she recognizes as a challenge to the uncle's attentions.

Miss Banderry begins "the game" by pretending to believe that the roses come from Barbie's uncle. She suggests her intimacy with him when she spies his thumbprints on the returned magazine and exclaims, "I'd know *those* anywhere!" and later, when she admits, "he's a handsome fellow." She does her best to make Barbie feel uncomfortable and to undermine the girl's vision of her own relationship with her uncle. Noting that the thumbprints must have been made while he was dining, Miss Banderry insists to Barbie, "it's a poor compliment to you" for him to read at the table.

Her remarks sting Barbie, who is not much of a match for the older woman. She feels as if Miss Banderry can see into her heart and recognize that she is in love with him. Until this point, her love for her uncle has been innocent but Miss Banderry's challenging banter with her, with its obvious sexual undertones, has sounded a note of "danger." Here Barbie glimpses for a moment the implications for her future as she faces the adult world of competition and deceit.

Miss Banderry implies that Barbie's uncle has asked many things of her when she cuts off Barbie's request "My uncle wants" with "What this time?" She tries to suggest the man's dependence on her when she exclaims, "Looking to me to keep him out of jail?" After calling him "a brute," however, she backs down and instructs Barbie, "tell my lord . . . I'll think it over." She insists that if he wants an answer "let him come himself"

and accuses him of hiding behind Barbie's "skirts." Barbie tries to defend him but knows that some of what the woman has said about her uncle's behavior is true.

Mrs. Banderry's comparison of her brother to Barbie's uncle fills the girl with "dread," an emotion she feels even as an adult whenever she sees the woman's house. Barbie recognizes that Miss Banderry's "amorous hostility" to her uncle "unsheathed itself when she likened him to the brother she drove to death." This knowledge apparently affects Barbie so greatly that her memory of the meeting breaks off at this point; she notes, "The other half is missing."

The meeting forces her to reexamine her own relationship with her uncle, yet she appears still to deny certain realities. She insists twice that she felt dread during her meeting with Miss Banderry, "not guilt." Twice also she "swears" that she and her uncle "did each other no harm." What she cannot admit is that her encounter with Miss Banderry, arranged by her uncle, did damage her, as does her meeting with him at the end of the afternoon. She acknowledges that she and her uncle had "played house together on the margin of a passion which was impossible" but because of that passion, he had thrown her into the adult world of experience, which she realizes can be dangerous. Nan reads this on Barbie's face when she exclaims to the departing girl, "Anybody would think you'd had bad news!"

When Barbie leaves Miss Banderry's, she is surprised to see her uncle's car outside of the hotel since she told him that she would take the bus home. Her uncle's presence at the hotel suggests an alternate, secretive motive that he never explains. She recognizes that he did not go there to meet her. By the end of this afternoon, Barbie's world has become irreparably altered. The streets are now "filmed by imponderable white dust" that seems to her "the pallor of suspense." The bus that should have been there, granting her "independence" from her uncle and his adult world, has gone, denying her an exit to "the scenes of safety," and "hope of solitude." Her past, innocent relationship with him is now "out of reach," and so she determines that he is no longer her "lord." The end of the story signals Barbie's entrance into this adult territory as she gets in her uncle's car, prompted by his touch on her elbow.

Bowen ends the story on an ambivalent inconclusive note. Readers do not know what happens to Barbie and her relationship with her uncle. Bowen does show us, however, in her finely crafted narrative that she has left her hopeful innocence behind after her "day in the dark" adult world of experience.

Source: Wendy Perkins, Critical Essay on "A Day in the Dark," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Read over the passages in which Barbie describes the landscape of Moher. Write a poem or a short sketch describing a scene in nature and your own or a character's emotional response to it.

Read Bowen's "The Demon Lover" and compare its themes to those of "A Day in the Dark."

Bowen lived in a "big house" much like the one occupied by Miss Banderry. Investigate the history of the region of Moher to get a sense of the changes that occurred that would have affected Miss Banderry. How do you think a woman like her would have lived before her family lost the milling business? How do you think this loss affected her? Use details from the story to back up your views.

Bowen had a difficult childhood as she continually moved from house to house and she eventually lost both her mother and father. Read biographical materials on her to determine whether you see any autobiographical details in the story. Do you think she would identify more with Barbie or with Miss Banderry?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Girls who engage in sexual activities continue to be sent to convents in Ireland to remove them from such opportunities and to teach them a sense of morality.

Today: Reflecting the relaxed sexual mores of the twenty-first century, sexual acts involving young adults can be viewed on cable television as well as on the Internet.

1950s: Ireland is plagued by high unemployment figures. This situation makes it even more difficult for women to find work. Women in the cities tend to stay home, but in rural areas, women often work farms alongside men. Both young men and women emigrate to other countries, including England and the United States, in search of better employment opportunities.

Today: Many young Irish stay in Ireland, which in the early 2000s experiences strong economic growth, especially in the cities where employment opportunities are expanding.

1950s: On both sides of the Atlantic, women feel a growing sense of dissatisfaction about the unequal treatment they receive in the home, the workplace, and in other institutions.

Today: Women have made major gains in their fight for equality. Discrimination against women is against the law in Ireland, in Britain, and in the United States.

What Do I Read Next?

Death in Venice (1913), by Thomas Mann, is a tragic tale of an acclaimed author's obsession for a young boy and an exploration of the nature of beauty.

The Awakening (1899), by Kate Chopin, is a novel of a young woman who struggles to find self-knowledge and inevitably suffers the consequences of trying to establish herself as an independent spirit.

Lolita (1955), by Vladimir Nabokov, focuses on the relationship between a young girl and an older man.

"The Demon Lover," one of Bowen's most popular stories, focuses on a woman whose lover is killed in the war.

Further Study

Chessman, Harriet, "Women and Language in the Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen," in *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 29, Spring 1983, pp. 69—85.

Chessman presents a feminist perspective of Bowen's work.

Dunleavy, Janet Egleson, "Mary Lavin, Elizabeth Bowen, and a New Generation: The Irish Short Story at Midcentury," in *The Irish Short Story: A Critical History*, edited by James Kilroy, Twayne, 1984, pp. 145—68.

Dunleavy explores the Irish context of Bowen's work and compares it to that of other Irish writers.

Glendinning, Victoria, *Elizabeth Bowen*, Knopf, 1977.

Glendinning's work is considered in the early 2000s to be the definitive biography of Bowen.

Sullivan, Walter, "A Sense of Place: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of the Heart," in *Sewanee Review*, Vol. 84, Winter 1976, pp. 142—49.

Sullivan explores the relationship between Bowen's technique and themes.

Bibliography

Christensen, Lis, "A Reading of Elizabeth Bowen's 'A Day in the Dark,'" in *Irish University Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Autumn/Winter 1997, pp. 299—309.

H. F. L. Jr., Review of *A Day in the Dark*, in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Winter 1966, pp. 276—77.

Morgan, Edwin, "Shambling Man," in *New Statesman*, Vol. 70, August 6, 1965, p. 191.

Smith, Laurel, "Elizabeth Bowen," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 162, *British Short-Fiction Writers, 1915—1945*, edited by John H. Rogers, Gale Research, 1996, pp. 49—56.

Tillinghast, Richard, "Elizabeth Bowen: The House, the Hotel, and the Child," in the *New Criterion*, Vol. 13, No. 4, December 1994, pp. 24—33.

Wilson, Angus, "Introduction," in *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*, Knopf, 1981, pp. 7—11.