


# 'We live one in another': The Gothic and uncanny representation of the female double in *The Crime of Laura Sarelle* by Joseph Shearing (pseudonym of Marjorie Bowen)

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Margaret Gabrielle Vere Long, née Campbell, was born in 1885 and died in 1952; she wrote mostly under the name of Marjorie Bowen. She was a prolific writer and produced historical romances, supernatural horror stories, popular history, biographies and an autobiography. Writing under the pseudonym Joseph Shearing, Bowen produced what can be considered Gothic mystery novels such as *The Crime of Laura Sarelle* (1941). In this article, I will conduct a close reading of this novel and will argue that Bowen's reimagining of the character Laura as simultaneously heroine and femme fatale, as well as eerily possessed by a ghostly past, makes an important contribution to the Gothic trope of the female double. Through a comparison of Bowen's evocation of the double and that of Daphne du Maurier's more famous evocation of the double in *Rebecca* (1938), I aim to demonstrate that Bowen's use of the double is more Gothically compelling and powerful than that of du Maurier. Moreover, I will contend that Bowen's unusual rendering of Gothic themes, along with her stylistic elegance, makes her work worthy of further scholarly study.

**Keywords:** Marjorie Bowen; Gothic; female double; Daphne du Maurier; uncanny.

## Introduction

On a 1965 Berkley Medallion cover for the novel *The Crime of Laura Sarelle*, written by Marjorie Bowen under the pseudonym Joseph Shearing, the following blurb appears: 'A hypnotic story of terror surpassing Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*'. In retrospect, this is an interesting piece of puffery, as, although du Maurier's *Rebecca* is much studied and was recently the subject of a film remake, Bowen's work has fallen into obscurity. Yet there are many thematic and plot similarities between Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rebecca*, published in 1938, and *Laura Sarelle*, published in 1940 in London and as *The Crime of Laura Sarelle* in the United States in 1941. I shall use the shorter British title, *Laura Sarelle*, in this article. Margaret Gabrielle Vere Long, née Campbell, was born in 1885 and died in 1952; she wrote mostly under the name of Marjorie Bowen. She was a prolific writer, in much the same manner as other female authors who wrote to support families, like Mrs Oliphant (1828–1897), E.M. Braddon (1835–1915) and Edith Nesbit (1858–1924). Bowen's oeuvre consists of historical romances, supernatural horror stories, popular history, biographies and an autobiography. Writing under the pseudonym Joseph Shearing, Bowen produced what can be considered Gothic mystery novels, a number of them based on true crimes. Other novels by Joseph Shearing, such as *Moss Rose* (1934), *The Golden Violet* (1941) and *The Crime of Laura Sarelle* (1941), were popular and commercially successful in the United States. *Moss Rose* (1947) and *So Evil My Love* (1948) were adapted into reasonably enjoyable films. Whether writing as Bowen or Shearing many of her novels are concerned with the supernatural, ghostly, moody and Gothically dramatic.

In her introduction to Bowen's *Twilight and Other Supernatural Romances*, Amanda Jessica Salmonson writes that Bowen's Shearing pseudonym seemed to ensure that 'he' was treated as 'something unique', as an 'endlessly inventive mystery writer who pulled few punches' (2013:loc 331). Salmonson notes that mystery critics were satisfied with the accuracy of the historical settings in Shearing's work, but that they were truly 'enamoured of stylistic excesses, clever plots, physical and emotional grotesqueries, mayhem, shocks and shivers' (2013:loc 368). It is these unruly aspects of Bowen's work that Salmonson correctly assesses as being the 'very ingredients' that so-called 'serious' critics tend to be quick to dismiss as unworthy of academic study (2013:loc 368). Along with the sadly deceased academic Edward Charles Wagenknecht

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(1990–2004), Salmonson is the only other person who has written any extensive critical appreciation of Bowen's work. In the introduction to the recent re-release of Bowen's 1949 work *The Bishop of Hell & Other Stories* (2006), Hilary Long, Bowen's son, mentions the fact that Bowen's work can be seen to emulate the Gothic thematics and atmosphere of works like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* and the writings of Ann Radcliffe. Listing the aspects of Bowen's writing, such as ruined buildings, deserted landscapes, storm clouds, storms, closed mansions and unvisited graves, Long indicates these represent the writer's desire to evoke 'the fearsome, the forbidding and the perplexing' (Bowen 2006:7). Wagenknecht, Long and Salmonson are all of the opinion that Bowen's work, as Long phrases it, 'receives little note these days', a statement which seems markedly true given the apparent paucity of scholarship available (Bowen 2006:12). My article wishes to call attention to the importance of Bowen's reimagining of the Gothic trope of the female double that has been mostly overlooked and which I consider is worthy of more considered scholarship.

Referencing Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), scholar Catherine Spooner has indicated that writers such as Daphne du Maurier, Charlotte Bronte, Emily Dickinson, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Emma Tennant and others have employed female doppelgängers in their novels. However, according to Spooner (2004), the concept of the female double is and remains a very under-examined representation. Through a close reading of the narrative of *Laura Sarelle*, I will examine Bowen's representation of the Gothic female doppelgänger and will argue that her rewriting and subversion of the double questions this figure as solely the preserve of masculine discourse. Furthermore, my article will contrast and compare Daphne du Maurier's evocation of the female double in *Rebecca* to that of *Laura Sarelle*, leading me to suggest that Bowen's portrayal of the female double is far more powerful than that of du Maurier. *Laura Sarelle* might appear to emulate what has been termed the female Gothic, yet her work, like that of Daphne du Maurier, does not entirely fit into the typical female Gothic plot.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I would suggest that in *Laura Sarelle*, Bowen's approach is far more subversive and offers fertile ground for further exploration, but this remains outside the scope of the current article. Gothically compelling and innovative, Bowen's representation of the female double can be seen to undermine the dichotomy between villain and heroine, imprisonment and angst, past and present, and madness and identity, which mark this representation of the uncanny female double as exceptional.

## The uncanny double

The concept of the double or doppelgänger and its uncanny nature usually relies on recourse to Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay *The Uncanny*. In this essay, Freud discussed the concept

1. As my article will not engage with the rise of the scholarship on the female Gothic as it is outside the scope of my discussion, see the introduction to *The Female Gothic: New Directions* edited by Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (2009) as well as more recent works such as Diana Wallace's *Female Gothic Histories: Gender History and the Gothic* (2013) and *Women and the Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* edited by Horner and Zlosnik (2017) amongst others.

of *das Unheimliche* (*unhomely*) and *das Heimliche* (*homely*) exploring the supernatural, weird, uncomfortable, strange, hidden, dangerous and familiar or unfamiliar characteristics located within these two words, which closely align to features of the Gothic. In the second section of his essay, Freud goes on to relate the concept of the uncanny to the concept of the double. However, the double is more fully explored in Otto Rank's *The Double* first published in 1914, Ralph Tymms' 1949 work *Doubles in Literary Psychology* and, more recently, Karl Miller's 1985 study *Doubles: Studies in Literary History*. What is interesting about these studies is that most of the literary works presented in them are related to male writers of the 19th century, though in Miller's work he does consider a single female writer, Sylvia Plath. This seems to enforce the idea that the concept of the double is very much a male imaginative construction and textual discourse. As Catherine Spooner (2004:128) has suggested, the doppelgänger is usually associated with 'texts labelled as "male"' or ones that examine the 'psychology of the villain rather than the heroine' and deal with 'male angst' rather than 'female imprisonment'. The pioneering work, *Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar is one of the first to examine the concept of the double in 19th century women's writing and little has since been done to more fully explore the figure of the female double. The double in the literature seems to remain a male imaginative construct and, therefore, though open to several psychoanalytical interpretations, still appears to be the purview of male writers and analysts. I will employ the work done on the double by both Freud and Rank in my examination of the representation of *Laura Sarelle*.

Otto Rank was interested in the literary appearance of the double and linked it to the spirit, which he regarded as distinct from the human body. Freud's work, based on that of Rank, related the double and the uncanny to the return of a hidden past. The double or doppelgänger is often considered demonic and is a representation of the repressed aspects of the character's persona, which can lead to the disintegration of subjectivity and madness. This idea of doubling is a recurring trope in Gothic literature that seems to ask us to 'read the protagonists as aspects of each other, a strategy of doubling which emphasises the instabilities of the boundaries of the self' (Horner & Zlosnik 2001:84). Catherine Spooner (2004:130) indicates that the double as a Gothic trope is marked by the 'stealing' by one character of another character's identity or is a state of being trapped in an alien identity. The double, according to Sara Wasson (2011:74), is linked to a divided self that psychoanalytically inflected literary criticism reads as repressed desires hidden from the light or as the fragmenting or fracturing of the self. Freud and Rank both suggest that the double can be a means to bolster a sense of self, but can simultaneously lead to a fracturing of the self. They relate this to a narcissistic longing to escape death or a denial of the death drive. Rank goes further and links the double to suicide. In contrast to Rank, Freud's discussion of the uncanny raises the question of whether an 'apparently animate object really is alive and conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate'

(Freud citing Jentsch 2003:135). Elizabeth Bronfen (1992) suggests that this uneasy animate or inanimate binary results in a blurring between fantasy and reality in a 'defence against the constraints and the prohibitions of the symbolic and the real' (p. 113). The blurring between fantasy and reality is visible in the depiction of the character of Laura Sarelle, who seems labile and simultaneously both herself and 'another'. The 'prohibitions of the symbolic and the real', associated with masculine control and power in the novel, are undermined and subverted by Laura's mutability and her duplication as the Gothic double.

## Return of a dark Gothic past

*Laura Sarelle* is set in 1840, three years into the reign of Queen Victoria, and 60 years away from the mystery around which the novel revolves.<sup>2</sup> The basic plotline of the novel seems to follow a traditional Gothic narrative of a young girl, Laura, who is brought to a forbidding mansion in which she is semi-imprisoned by her older, autocratic brother, Theodosius. This remote and sinister mansion, Leppard Hall, is described throughout the novel as having a dark, gloomy, bleak and flat appearance and as a lonely place. Theodosius, in his eccentric unsociableness, ensures that Laura's social life, movement and identity become suspended, so that she is isolated, entrapped and bored. Laura is very young and disliked by her brother as a person and as a responsibility; however, she is also of use to him as an economic and lineage tool. His wish is to marry her to a wealthy man who will assume the surname Sarelle, and this is something that Laura is unable to directly gainsay, as she is completely subject to Theodosius's control and authority. Instead, she employs wiles and manipulation, along with what is considered excessive behaviour, to subvert expectations and, thus, to escape Theodosius's tyranny. Laura is in love with her brother's steward, secretary and erstwhile friend Lucius Delaunay. Although of the same class as the Sarelles, Lucius has no fortune being the youngest son. It is Laura's love for Lucius, along with her dictatorial brother forcing her into an arranged marriage with Harry Mostyn but, far more importantly, her intense dislike of the portrait of her ancestress Laura Sarelle and hatred of Leppard Hall and its secrets, which drives the narrative's plot and acts as the catalyst in the tragic denouement. The Gothic and alienating nature of Leppard Hall and the madness that seems to emanate from within it is, I suggest, Bowen's genuflection to Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Both Laura Sarelle and her brother are born and raised in Jamaica with the hint at a possible predisposition to insanity. Laura's female companion Mrs Sylk indicates that she 'faintly disliked dark people and both Sir Theodosius and Laura were very dark' having a "'foreign blackness" in hair and eye' (Bowen 2017:loc 470), characteristics that seem to hint at the same mixed ancestry ascribed to Bertha Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. Bowen hints that the current line of Sarelles, who now own Leppard Hall, is marked by instability and degeneracy.

<sup>2</sup>Edward Wagenknecht writes that the early novels by Bowen, under the pseudonym Joseph Shearing, were 'all reconstructions and attempted solutions of old crimes' and that *Laura Sarelle* is based on the 1781 execution of Captain John Donellan for the murder of his brother-in-law Sir Theodosius Edward Allesley Boughton with laurel water (1991:161).

Their fortune has accrued from the sale of possessions in Jamaica, and this reference to Jamaica might be considered a subtle critique of colonialism and the economic wealth based on slavery that funds the male Sarelles. This, probably tainted, wealth now acts to enslave the young Laura and is one of the factors that can be seen to precipitate her mental instability. Bowen subtly creates intertextual links to *Jane Eyre* as like Thornfield Hall, Leppard Hall is funded through wealth from the colonies that comes with accursed ghosts and secrets and a final descent into madness and destruction.

Edward Wagenknecht (1991:160) regards the novel *Laura Sarelle* as an exploration of 'the past impinging upon and almost controlling the present'. This reliance on a dark past returning into the present is what Chris Baldick (1992) considers a central feature necessary for a work to be considered a Gothic narrative:

For the Gothic effect to be attained a tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration (p. xix)

It is the inheritance of a past contained within the confines of a specific space which leads to a fraught uncomfortableness and fear that is caught in Bowen's novel. This uneasiness is created through an evocation of a sense of something inexplicable taking place that promises a dreadful conclusion. The plot of *Laura Sarelle* revolves around a secret concerning a dark event from the past suppressed by the male line of the Sarelles as antithetical to their belief in rationalism, as well as a cover for their avarice. This concealment of what Baldick refers to as the 'fearful sense of inheritance' will lead to Laura's quest to discover the 'truth' that results in a murder that replicates the past and is followed by a descent into madness and death. It is the hidden past, and the stories and superstition surrounding it, which authoritative characters, such as Laura's brother, refuse to acknowledge. Yet, it is this past that is deeply present in the vivid and intriguing opening sentences of the novel:

'They are not to be spoken of; they dwell in darkness!'

Laura answered swiftly:

'They dwell in this house!'

Her brother looked at her with gloomy rebuke. (Bowen 2017:loc 54)

The opening sentence by Theodosius is one that is both repressive and, at the same time, establishes the Gothic and supernatural tone of the novel. Indicating that something is not to be spoken of always raises curiosity. But it is the second part of the sentence, separated by a semicolon, that opens up an ambivalence and disquiet. Something that dwells in darkness implies something with possible evil connotations, not to be brought to light for fear of the repercussions it might have in the present. In this instance, it seems that language itself has been rendered uncanny where meaning acts as 'a kind of gap between codes, a point at which representation itself appears to fail, displace,

or diffuse itself' (Sage & Smith 1996:2). Theodosius is unaware of the ambivalence of his statement; for him it is the past that cannot and should not be recovered, as it is of no importance. However, it is Laura's response that seems to place this evil and darkness firmly in the present, inside the walls of the house and a sense of dread and suspense are immediately evoked.

The argument and battle of wills between Laura and her brother concerns a set of portraits that hang side by side at the end of the long dining room in the mansion. One is of a man and one of a woman. However, it is the portrait of the woman that arouses in Laura a sense of dread and dislike and this sense of disquiet will take possession of the plot. The portrait of the woman is described as 'rather flat and drab' in its depiction of a young woman dressed in a:

[l]ong tight-waisted gown of the palest primrose colour with its bow of pale-blue-and-cream striped ribbon tucked into her narrow bosom. Her hair was either pale or powdered and gathered straight off her face. Her features were scarcely to be discerned, so lightly had the painter indicated them, but they appeared to be regular; the eyes, which had been put in with a firmer touch were large and of a clean, clear brown colour. (Bowen 2017:loc 372)

The framing of the portrait is interesting because it has a design of laurel leaves and is seen as being 'more fitting for the portrait of a warrior than of a gentle woman' (Bowen 2017:loc 388). Yet, the portrait with its washed out features and pale-coloured clothing is merely an amateurish sketch that seems to offer a commentary by Bowen on masculine agency and female self-abnegation, elision and passivity. Strangely it is the eyes of the female portrait that act as the focal point, as though she is continually watching the world outside the frame of her containment. It is this painting that Laura regards with what Mrs Sylk terms 'feelings of aversion and even horror' because it is the portrait of the original Laura Sarelle, after whom the living Laura has been named (loc 372). Laura is aware that there is some unsavoury secret concerning her ancestress, having heard tales about the 'dead woman'. The tales are vague and concern the original Laura Sarelle's early death and a scandal, during which someone had died from an overdose of a sleeping draught. The dead Laura was thought to have been implicated in this death, but was acquitted. The living Laura has requested that the paintings be removed, but Theodosius is adamant in his refusal to move the paintings because he considers that Laura 'talks a great deal of nonsense' and he will not give in to the 'whim of an undisciplined girl' (loc 405). What Theodosius implies is that her resistance to his masculine authority is excessive, irrational and has too much to do with uncontrolled feelings and the sensational.

## Vagaries, charm and caprices: Gothic heroine and femme fatale

The Gothic heroine is often linked to the sensational and feelings, but she generally adheres to behaviour that is proper and suited to the times in which she is placed. She is beautiful, often blonde, sensitive and exhibits a passive courage as she

attempts to escape from male control and the domestic ideal. In Bowen's (2017) novel, Laura is focalised by her female companion, Mrs Sylk, as 'quick, sensitive, fanciful and fantastical' as well as having a 'charming face' (loc 355; 372) and by the family lawyer as 'pretty, dainty and bright' (loc 797). Even her rakish suitor and future husband, Mr Mostyn, calls Laura a 'very charming and beautiful young lady' (loc 2531). This attractiveness of person seems to confirm Laura's position as a Gothic heroine. Theodosius is aware of her heroine-like qualities when he refers to her as a 'pretty creature! A splendid creature! A girl who had an air of breeding and nobility' (loc 2353). The use of the word 'creature' is rather odd and condescending as it seems to place Laura outside the realm of the human, and equate her with animals, the natural and the irrational. It is an expression of Theodosius's own misogyny and fear of Laura, and his response to her is generally repressive and essentialising, containing, as it does, an underlying anger and passionate dislike. Yet, Laura is quick to respond to and deny his authority and is described with 'narrowed eyes' filled with rebellion (loc 54). His reaction to this passionate and unruly behaviour is weary and patronising as he refers to her as a 'dear child' and indicates that she needs to learn the 'feminine arts' of keeping a home (loc 72; 90). However, he is also overbearing and nasty when he tells her that she speaks as if she were 'out of her senses' and that she has always been considered 'wild and wilful' (loc 90; 126), stressing that he considers her to be acting with impropriety and a lack of rationality, whilst hinting that she is a hysteric and touched with madness.

Theodosius is not the only one to remark on a strange ambivalence between Laura's charming docility and her unruly, passionate and defiant outbursts. The family lawyer, Mr Spryce, tells her that she is 'wilful' and 'rather lax' and he recalls that her father and uncle had been 'afraid of her character', that they felt was constituted of 'vagaries, fancies, and sudden caprices and staunch and constant passions' (Bowen 2017:loc 197). Yet, at the same time, the lawyer says to her that she is 'a very charming, modest, and docile young lady' and he is aware of her 'beauty', which he sees as 'fresh as a rose-leaf' (loc 858, 917). Laura is represented as beautiful and seductive, but modest and docile, as well as possessed of an oddness and instability of emotions and mind. Her future husband Harry Mostyn also sees her as a 'charming creature', 'quite enchanting with precise features', 'dark sparkling eyes' and with 'a bloom, a freshness and a vitality that was very attractive, and though she might be capricious and wilful', he feels that he will be able to 'tame' her (loc 2646). Again, Laura is seen as like a wild animal that needs to be brought under strong male control and governance. Nevertheless, Harry's interactions with Laura both please him and disconcert him as he tries to 'forget her shrewd spirit, her eccentric ways, her occasionally wild laughter' (loc 3159). In this manner, Laura's character is focalised through a masculine perspective as having something excessive about it, something perplexing that lies hidden beneath her external appearance and marks her as unpredictable and dangerous. These very different viewpoints of Laura, whilst they show her heroine-like qualities, also reveal her as exhibiting the transgressive

behaviour associated with the femme fatale.<sup>3</sup> Always a representation of female disobedience that acts in direct opposition to masculine control, the figure of the femme fatale remains alluringly desirable whilst simultaneously evoking a sense of fear or unease in men. Stevie Simkin, in her recent work, *Cultural Constructions of the Femme Fatale* (2014), suggests that the femme fatale is often placed into competition with the chaste domesticated woman, or the heroine (p. 6–7). Ultimately, for Simkin, the femme fatale is a ‘conventionally beautiful woman who lures the male hero into dangerous situations by overpowering his will with her irresistible sexuality’ (Simkin 2014:8). In Bowen’s novel, Laura’s dangerous manipulation and strength of will, whilst not depicted as sexualised, will lure not the hero but the anti-hero into committing a deadly act. All the male characters in Bowen’s novel are seen to have a contradictory response to Laura; whilst they acknowledge her beauty and her allure, they are also very disturbed by her passionate defiance and steely willpower. The portrayal of the heroine and femme fatale as separate characters that are in competition with one another has been subverted by Bowen through her melding of these attributes into a single character, Laura. In doing this, Bowen provides Laura with a more complex persona as her external surface and inner subjectivity are problematised with the result that there is a constant division in her subjectivity, which impels the plot.

As a heroine, Laura should conform to masculine and social expectations. Her arguing with her brother about not wishing to remain at Leppard Hall, and her suggestion that she could escape the Hall and his control through her marriage, forcibly acts to destabilise Theodosius’s ideas of accepted proprietaries and his perceived authoritative position. Bowen presents Laura from the brother’s male perspective, one of stern and censorious contempt based on his consideration of her as an antithetical creature who is ‘everything ... different from himself’ (Bowen 2017:loc 140). Theodosius fears that his lack of physical strength will be unable to withstand Laura’s resolve and her ‘hidden spirit as strong as his own’ which always ‘in the end slightly unnerved him’ (loc 155). Theodosius’s thoughts about his sister establish his character as a petty, power hungry tyrant, who uses his position to control and demean his sister because he fears her Otherness, unknowability, excessiveness and possibly uncontrollable passion. According to Elizabeth Bronfen (1992:181), femininity has always been consigned to a position of Otherness and, as this Other, woman has served to ‘define the self, and the lack or excess that is located in the Other is an exteriorisation of the self’. Theodosius, therefore, defines his sense of self as rational by projecting onto Laura the imputed characteristics of irrational and excessive emotionalism, and in this manner sets up his authority based on an ideology of gender difference. The binary nature of Laura as good, pure and helpless is set against her dangerous, chaotic, seductive and passionate self, which is experienced by Theodosius as a threat to the security of his control over

her, which now contains within it a fear of its loss. Functioning as the Other, Laura becomes the site over which tension between control and loss of power plays, rendering her as a locus of *Unheimlichkeit* (Bronfen 1992:182). This threat to Theodosius’s control, and his experience of Laura as uncanny and dangerous, is expressed in her eyes of fury that are filled with hatred towards him (Bowen 2017:loc 2341). Initially, Laura’s desire to defeat her brother and obtain freedom and a sense of agency is described in less explicit terms, when the external narrator provides the reader access to her inner thoughts:

For the young brother to whom she had spoken was her master and might easily be, she knew, her tyrant. She had to play the game that women have learned during the ages to be so skilful at, to watch her opportunity, to cajole, if need be, to deceive. (Bowen 2017:loc 54)

Laura, whilst employing this form of manipulation and game playing, still considers this behaviour to be ‘slavish arts’, a playing into the male social system that is base, ignoble and unworthy and to which she hates to be subservient. For Laura feminine wiles are a form of slavery, but she employs deceit and other feminine arts to obtain her objectives. These hidden aspects of Laura’s character are at odds with her appearance and her role as heroine. Rather they are the characteristics of the deadly woman or femme fatale, a figure Mary Ann Doane (1991) considers to be a paradox and enigma; a figure that contains a threat that ‘is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable’ (p. 1). Laura’s representation is one of ambivalence as it vacillates between docile charm and dangerous unpredictability with the hint that if her passion is finally unleashed it will lead to destruction and madness. Yet the power that Laura as an embodiment of a femme fatale seems to possess is of a contradictory nature and, according to Doane (1991:2), seems outside of her conscious control, thereby blurring the opposition between passivity and agency. The descriptions of Laura’s physical and behavioural characteristics coincide with a subtle fragmentation of her subjectivity indicative of her not being consciously in control of her contradictory nature. For Jennifer Hedgecock (2008:295), the femme fatale in her excess is associated with death and violence, as she creates devious schemes and plots murder. In Bowen’s novel it will become apparent that Laura, in true femme fatale manner, does indeed create and plot a devious, if mad, scheme to murder her brother when she becomes possessed by vengeful forces from the past. Laura’s embodiment as both heroine and femme fatale, I suggest, assumes a form of psychological Gothic doubling that becomes more discernible and uncannier in the pivotal scene of the plot.

## Paintings and doubles

This pivotal scene occurs when the novel’s hero figure, Lucius Delaunay, and Theodosius are in the midst of a quarrel in the study of Leppard Hall. Lucius wishes to leave his position as steward and secretary to Theodosius and tempers are high when the door opens abruptly, and it seems as though a ghost has entered the room:

<sup>3</sup>There has been a lot written on the femme fatale, particularly in her portrayal in film: see Braun (2012); Dijkstra (1988); Grossman (2009); Menon (2006); Praz (1996) and Stott (1992) amongst others.

A tall, pale young woman stood in the doorway dressed in a gown of rubbed primrose silk with the palest of blue ribbons at the bosom, her hair powdered, her dark eyes shining with excitement and in her hand a spray of dark laurel. She was the exact likeness of the portrait in the dining-room, save that the faint tint of the oil painting here glowed with life in the warm though pale colourings of the girl, and the costume was bright and real in the stuff sparkle of the silk, in the glint of the bows of cracked ribbon. (Bowen 2017:loc 1177)

This sudden appearance arouses a sense of uncanny terror in Lucius and Theodosius. For Freud such an uncanny effect occurs when something familiar is unexpectedly rendered unfamiliar and there is uncertainty and doubt as to whether an apparently animate object is really alive, or whether a lifeless object is not in fact animate (Freud 2003:135). The uncanny aspect in this key scene is reliant on the device of the Gothic portrait that assumes life, or what Horner and Zlosnik (2002:170) refer to as the 'moving picture', but which I prefer to term a living portrait. This doubling of portrait and living human can be considered an uncanny effect, a form of *doppelgänger*, as two Lauras seem to assume life and human identity. Horner and Zlosnik (2002:170–171) explore this coming to life of a painting in relation to Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* and note that it is a classic Gothic trope with its origins in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1765). They go on to indicate that 'the trope of the portrait which turns to flesh continues to inform Gothic writing', and it is the relationship between the painting and the living being that is dynamic and replete with uncanny qualities, particularly in the painting's relation to a mansion that contains portraits of family members (Horner & Zlosnik 2002:171). The living portrait can possess specific anxieties related to hereditary and familial identities and it is the portrait of Laura Sarelle that is indicative of something dark, mysterious and evil at the heart of Leppard Hall and the Sarelle family history. As the future husband of the living Laura Sarelle, Harry Mostyn is aware of something wrong about Leppard Hall as it seems 'full of something intangibly gloomy, sad and evil' (Bowen 2017:loc 3182). However, it is the parson associated with Leppard Hall, who considers 'the whole place' to be 'infected with the dreams of the dead' (Bowen 2017:loc 1716). Laura, too, refers to the dreams of the dead, indicating that this is when people die and go on dreaming and 'their dreams come abroad as spectres and apparitions, seize hold of the living and even enter into them' (loc 3887). Bowen's narrative seems replete with the insistent presence of the past and the portrait, with its central position in the Hall, evokes the unfamiliar in a space that should be familiar. Anne Williams in her work *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of the Gothic* (1995:45) indicates that it is the house that 'embodies the family history' and is a reminder that the 'word "house" has two meanings relevant to Gothic fiction – it refers both to the building itself and to the family line'. She goes on to indicate that this identification of the house with forebears and building is made in works such as *Jane Eyre* and *Rebecca* and it is very apparent in Bowen's connection of Leppard Hall to family inheritance and genealogy (p. 45).

In Bowen's novel, power, prestige and family identity have been re-assumed by the male line of the Sarelles, but it is the

portrait of Laura Sarelle, and her living double, that threatens this property and the patriarchal structures in the novel. In similar manner to the narrator in du Maurier's *Rebecca*, Bowen shows Laura wearing the costume of her relative, the Laura Sarelle depicted in the painting. It is through means of a living portrait that Bowen mirrors and doubles female subjectivity and the anxieties both physical and mental that surround the family and the mansion. Laura's self seems to be duplicated and interchanged with that of the portrait in a 'repetition of the same facial feature' and the same name that is to be found through the 'successive generations' of the Sarelles (Freud 2003:142). This sense of uncanny replication of self and other is eerily caught in the motto borne by the Sarelle's for generations, 'We live in one another'. It is with dismal shock that Lucius Delaunay has realised that the interpretation of this could mean that 'one generation would live on in another' and that the dead Laura Sarelle might be 'haunting the living bearer of her name' (Bowen 2017:loc 1853). He is subconsciously aware of this doubling when he exclaims at Laura's appearance: 'Why, Laura, dressed up like the portrait! What a strange masquerade!' (Bowen 2017:loc 1177). The idea that Laura is playing a game of masks through her adoption of the dress of the long dead strikes fear into Theodosius and is visible in his admonishment: 'You will never go in for this kind of masquerade again, you will never indulge your foolishness so wantonly again' (Bowen 2017:loc 1213). The use of the words 'wantonly' and 'foolishness' are an indication of Theodosius's own fear of Laura's disturbing femininity, which he dichotomises as either whore or silly virgin. His excessive anger with Laura is because she is not only physically identical in appearance but, by donning the clothing of the past, is also assuming the tainted, secret history associated with the dead Laura – a past that Theodosius vehemently wishes to negate. Rank (1971) indicates that according to beliefs that surrounded the double it was thought that two offspring of the same family bearing the same name meant that 'one of them had to die' (p. 53). Freud (2003), in similar fashion to Rank, indicates that the double becomes an 'uncanny harbinger of death' (p. 142). Laura's wearing of the costume of her ancestress is seemingly one of innocence because she lacks real knowledge concerning the past. Yet, her action can be interpreted as a wilful identification with the deceased Laura that will allow for the substitution of the living Laura's self by a ghostly self from the past (Freud 2003:142). Lucius sees Laura as 'lovely in the costume of the last century' with her 'slender figure' and the 'strong purity of her fine features' and 'naturally brilliant complexion' with the 'colour and purity of a blush rose' (Bowen 2017:loc 1231; 1249). Focalised in terms of the beautiful, innocent and youthful heroine, Laura possesses what Lucius sees as 'an appeal and a power that men would do well to recognize' (loc 1249). This power and appeal carried by Laura allows her an agency that is not under the control of men, rather it provides her with the means to manipulate and control them.

Laura, like the *femme fatale*, seems to inhere 'closely to her body', so that it is her physicality that becomes excessive and 'overrepresented' (Doane 1991:2). This feminine masquerade

remains disturbing because, though this performance seems to offer her a form of power, it is one that is not really subject to her own conscious will, and as such it leads to a blurring of the opposition between passivity and activity (Doane 1991:2). Unlike du Maurier's unnamed narrator, who is persuaded by the sinister Mrs Danvers into choosing the costume based on a painting of her husband's ancestress, Laura actively searches for something belonging to the Laura from the painting and chooses to wear it in an act of purposive self-identification with the figure in the portrait, which she both fears and loathes. As Lucius Delaunay pertinently comments, 'you found that charming gown and made yourself such a beautiful replica of the picture you will cease, perhaps, to dislike it?' (Bowen 2017:loc 1205). Laura is an exact imitation of her ancestress and this raises questions concerning the authenticity of the 'self', which is allied to the Gothic's obsession with fragmented or lost identity, but is also directly associated with surface perceptions (Horner & Zlosnik 2002:179). The excess theatricality of the garments Laura wears becomes the means for what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1986:149) refers to as a 'contagious interchange', where the attributes of clothing are transferred to the flesh. This contagious transference of attributes from garments to the flesh, I argue, seems to reside in Laura's refashioning of herself as the portrait, which allows for an uncanny palimpsestic overwriting of qualities from the portrait onto her living body, causing her 'self' to transform into a 'ghost of the counterfeit' (Hogle 2001:299). As this ghostly counterfeit, Laura will become the vengeful tool of the past aimed at the destruction of the evils of Leppard Hall and male domination.

The painting of the original Laura is a site of liminality because as a spatial creation it is static and contained, a subject frozen in time. In Bowen's novel, this living portrait scene uncannily destabilises the opposition between the inanimate painting of the original Laura, whose presence seems to pervade Leppard Hall and its environs, and the sentient Laura who seems to become spectral. The mirror image of her dead relative, Laura elides the past and the present, the living and the dead as she observes: 'I dare say that after a while I shall feel I am in the past again and that I am the other Laura Sarelle' (Bowen 2017:loc 1195). It is this strange temporal aspect in Laura's statement that Theodosius insists upon gainsaying in his furious reaction: 'It is the present and the future that you have to live in, not the past' (loc 1213). Laura mischievously responds to this anger:

I feel that I am the other Laura Sarelle. I shall close my eyes and imagine what she was like and what she did. Perhaps her whole history will come back to me in a kind of trance or dream (Bowen 2017:loc 1231).

Laura's insistence that she is the other Laura Sarelle is deeply disturbing and uncanny because Laura does not just identify with the original Laura; she implies that she is, or wishes to be, the dead woman. This represents a total breakdown of the barriers between past and present, living and dead, good and bad women that hints at an instability and psychological splitting at work in the living Laura. According to Catherine

Spoooner (2004:130), the important thing about doubles is that they look alike and share the same surface features such as clothing, mannerisms and, in Laura's case, familial bonds. Spoooner (2004) notes that the Gothic trope of the double is associated with either stealing identity or 'becoming trapped in an alien identity by wearing (or recreating) their clothes' (p. 130). The adoption of an alien identity by wearing a costume associated with the past is prominent in the doubling that occurs in both du Maurier's *Rebecca* and in Bowen's *Laura Sarelle*. Horner and Zlosnik (2002:178) indicate that the narrator of *Rebecca* is in some manner possessed by the ghost of the dead Rebecca, but, I suggest, this is a far less supernatural and destructive possession than in Bowen's novel, where Laura becomes a veritable walking, breathing and deadly ghost. Laura's animation of the portrait by dressing up in a dead woman's garments allows these surfaces from the past to invoke a supernatural metamorphosis so that a dead woman possesses the living as a sinister doppelgänger.

The unhealthy nature of this doubling is apparent in Lucius Delaunay's sense of repulsion for the living Laura, when he feels a:

... spiritual nausea, a sickness that after a while became almost physical. Something was wrong ... in that exquisite and frail femininity ... he seemed to see the symbol of something that was doomed and evil. He had the impression that this was really the other Laura Sarelle, that she had returned to earth either to accomplish some desperate purpose or to avenge some desperate wrong. (Bowen 2017:loc 1249)

There is something preternatural and abject in Lucius's extreme response of nausea and a sense of evil when he looks at Laura. He, too, sees her as a spectral double of the original Laura, but this doubling is for him unhealthy, as it seems to elide the subjectivity of the living Laura, replacing it with something inherently twisted and uncongenial. This is added to by Laura's maliciousness when she goads her brother 'I gave you a shock when I came in just now, didn't I! ... You really thought I was a ghost' (Bowen 2017:loc 1213). In response, Theodosius violently grabs Laura's wrists and says: 'Go upstairs at once, take off all that mummery and try to live a sane and sober life', further implying that Laura is unstable and that she needs to return to her place as a sober and docile heroine, who obeys and is subject to his authority (loc 1231). Yet, as Lucius Delaunay watches this scene he is aware that Laura is 'overawed but not frightened. Physically she submitted, spiritually she defied her master' and he notes that her eyes 'flashed with a secret fury', the violence of this inner emotion seeming at odds with Laura's external acquiescence (loc 1231). Laura appears possessed by a hostile force from the past that threatens to usurp and destroy, not only her identity, but that of the future of the Sarelles.

## Suicide, madness and fractured identity

Lucius Delaunay is more accurate than he realises when he feels that the image of the living Laura is 'really the other Laura Sarelle, that she had returned to earth either to

accomplish some desperate purpose or to avenge some desperate wrong' (Bowen 2017:loc 1249). The living Laura's 'frail femininity' seems overlaid with a masculine determination, a masculine strength that threatens something dangerously violent. The blurring of the boundaries between 'the returned dead' and the living is, in Laura's doubling, indicative of the 'uncanniness of the death drive', which seems to compel Laura to attempt suicide after she learns of Lucius Delaunay's decision to leave Leppard Hall. Horner and Zlosnik (2002:177) indicate that in *Rebecca*, Mrs Danvers encourages the narrator to commit suicide after the fiasco of her appearance in costume so that the narrator can join Rebecca in the realm of the dead. The narrator resists and this, Horner and Zlosnik (2002:177) suggest, allows Rebecca to join the narrator in the living world and rob her of an identity. Contrary to du Maurier, in Bowen's narrative it is not a living person who suggests that Laura commit suicide, rather Laura declares 'a young girl, in every way like herself, was by her side, encouraging her to something dreadful – self-destruction' (Bowen 2017:loc 2050). Laura's act seems to be predicated on a need to escape both her 'self' and the entrapping presence of Leppard Hall, as she tries to drown herself in the river in an image that is reminiscent of the death of Shakespeare's mad Ophelia. For Rank (1971:12, 14), this type of uncanny double is 'clearly an independent and visible cleavage of the ego', and Laura seems to be possessed by a destructive delusion of a double that runs beside and pursues her. The life of this double, with the same name and physical appearance, seems to have been detached simultaneously from the painting and the living Laura and has become an individual being, one which is inextricably linked to the sentient Laura (Rank 1971:16, 19).

Laura's 'story' is dismissed by the male doctor who attributes Laura's insistence on this other figure as 'raving' and 'strong fits of delirium', thus pathologising Laura and implying she is mad (Bowen 2017:loc 2050). Elaine Showalter has suggested that madness has been attributed to women as part of their 'essential feminine nature' as opposed to male rationality (1987:3). It is this apparently scientific, if not patronising, attitude that the doctor appears to be taking towards Laura, as he confines her to the otherness of her body, thereby essentialising her as irrational and out of control. Laura's constant fluctuation of persona and mood establishes a gliding, flowing instability suggestive of an insidious destabilisation of subjectivity that will lead to calamity and final madness. The fissuring of Laura's subjectivity caused by her doubling acts as a:

... figure for a split or gap, a figure signifying that something that was whole and unique has been split into more than one part, and as such a figure for ... fragmentation. (Bronfen 1992:114)

Laura is subconsciously aware of something wrong, of this split state, when she says to Mrs Sylk:

You know I have the sensation I have been here before and under most evil circumstances ... When I saw the gates at the bottom of the park I said to myself 'So I have to come back here again after all these years'... 'I wonder why I'm talking like this! I'm not usually so foolish, am I, Mrs Sylk?' (Bowen 2017:loc 320, 338)

She further says, 'I'm stupid sometimes, as if I didn't know what I was doing, as if I had a kind of fit' (Bowen 2017:loc 3533). Often described as listless, reserved, shut up in herself, confused, dull or talking incoherently, 'fanciful and half bewitched', this fragmentation of Laura's subjectivity becomes more apparent after her attempted suicide (loc 3249). Her moments of lethargy increase when she is seen to walk 'very slowly with a heavy dragging step', which alternates with movements of 'great rapidity', which Mrs Sylk views with terror as 'an unnatural swiftness' (loc 2799). Laura appears to veer between 'intensity of expression' and 'sudden languor' in a fluid, almost bipolar, form of behaviour, leading to many insinuations concerning her sanity (loc 2754, 2799). She is described as 'unsettled in her wits, unbalanced in her mind, especially since her illness' and as 'wild' (loc 2992). Lucius Delaunay considers Laura might be sickly in her imagination and Mrs Sylk is 'alarmed for her state of mind' and wonders if Laura's 'wits are deranged' (loc 1475, 4613). Yet, Laura is soon shown recovering her 'calm and tranquil spirits' and giving 'no one any difficulty' (loc 4613). This vacillation between states with its implications of insanity is something that the doctor, who treats Laura, considers an 'attempt to escape' from 'some destiny that she fears' (loc 2084). A disruption exists between Laura and her double that causes her reality and sense of self to crumble, causing her inability to decide which 'self' is actually hers (Bronfen 1992:113). This produces a sense of terrible anxiety that Bowen employs to heighten the tension in the narrative. *Laura Sarelle*, I maintain, is founded on a rather more extreme version of the double than that which occurs within du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Whilst the figure of Rebecca is a malign presence in the narrative, this does not result in the same fragmentation in the unnamed narrator's sense of self as that seen in the character of Laura Sarelle. Moreover, the ghost of Rebecca does not enact revenge for the past through the possession of the narrator, unlike the double in the narrative of *Laura Sarelle* where the dead Laura uses the living to enact a nasty and perverse vengeance.

## Murder by mimicry

Once the living Laura ferrets out the secret of the past and its evils, she makes her 'final desperate attempt to save herself' by re-enacting the other Laura's crime (Wagenknecht 1991:163). After secretly marrying Harry Mostyn, she slyly involves her husband in situations to provide evidence against him, and then manipulates him into murdering her brother by administering a lethal sleeping draught she has prepared of laurel water. The murder is itself a peculiar form of doubled revenge, as if the past with its secrets has returned to uncover all that was hidden, thereby uncovering all its terrors in the present. Laura's hold on reality fragments and she descends into madness and runs towards the river where she had previously attempted suicide. Harry Mostyn, in pursuit of the 'pale figure', returns in a state of befuddlement saying to Lucius 'I had to let *them* go – there were two of them' (Bowen 2017:loc 5448). The supernatural element of Bowen's story hinges on these final words, and it culminates in suicide, a denouement that Rank (1971) sees as 'frequently linked with



pursuit by the double, the self' (p. 73). Bowen's uncanny doubling, of persona, murder and the act of self-destruction at the end of *Laura Sarelle*, represents a final escape attempt from both self and 'other', as well as a subversion of socially accepted behaviour. According to Bronfen (1992), an escape through suicide is 'an authorship with one's own life' poised as it is between 'self-construction and self-destruction' and it is a means to get rid of the 'oppression connected with the female body' (p. 142). The self-inflicted death of the heroine-villain and her double is required so that the world of the novel regains a sense of stability. Yet, unlike du Maurier's burning down of the family estate of Manderley in *Rebecca* or Brontë's similarly destroyed Thornfield Hall, the conclusion of Bowen's novel does not see Leppard Hall destroyed. The request for the Hall to be torn down, contained in the original Laura Sarelle's last will and testament, was purposefully ignored and has led to her successors finding 'themselves accursed' (Bowen 2017:loc 2602). It is only with the death of the living Laura and her double that Lucius believe 'Now they will raze it [*the Hall*] to the ground' (loc 5427). This is not a given and it seems that the Hall, and its uncanny malevolence and ghosts, might still survive to perpetuate further evil in the future. Bowen's story remains sinister, strange and malevolent as its play between the real and the dream that into madness and the destruction of the Sarelle lineage.

## Conclusion

Catherine Spooner (2004:134) indicates that du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* 'sets the blueprint for the twentieth century novel of the female double', but I would like to suggest that this overlooks the contribution of Marjorie Bowen's *Laura Sarelle* to this exploration of the female double. Bowen's employment of the Gothic double enables her narrative to engage with the dark secrets of female oppression, corporeality, madness, rage, fractured selves and attempts to escape that reveal the condition of women. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) in their study *The Madwoman in the Attic* write that it is 'through the violence of the double that the female author enacts her own raging desire to escape male houses and texts', and they indicate that it is through the double's violence that the author articulates the destructiveness of anger repressed (p. 85). There is a lurking and repressed anger in the novel *Laura Sarelle* closely associated with both Laura and her dark double that might possibly represent Bowen's own impassioned response to the definitions of femininity imposed on women. However, this anger and violence in the narrative leads to the final self-destruction of the heroine and her double, undermining the normal happy ending associated with traditional Gothic fiction. In Bowen's novel, Laura is both the victim and the transgressor in her struggle to overcome, defy and gain economic, corporeal and individual freedom. The double represents both a construction of Laura's sense of self and leads to her self-destruction, allowing her to escape her incarceration, not only in space but also in the place of the body and the temporal. My aim throughout this article has been to demonstrate the importance of Bowen's innovative reimaging of the trope of the Gothic female double.

Her eerie construction of Laura Sarelle as a character, I have argued, is more destructive, violent, tormented and powerful than du Maurier's *Rebecca*. Bowen's adroit creation of a character that is doubled in her identity, her name and her behaviour, I consider, sets Laura apart, as one of the more subversive explorations of the trope of the Gothic double. The replication of destiny and misdeed in the motto 'we live one in another' imbues the world of Bowen's story with 'the dreams of the dead that seize hold of and enter the living', causing the reader's flesh to creep with horror. Not only Bowen's stylistic elegance, but her subversive exploration and reliance on Gothic themes and tropes shows her to be a writer of discernible merit, whose work deserves more attention in studies of 20th-century Gothic literature.

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