

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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***Eva Trout: Or Changing Scenes* (1968)**

Elizabeth Bowen

OVERVIEW

Eva Trout follows the life of the eponymous heiress. Orphaned by her mother's death when she was a child and her father Willy's suicide, Eva is left in the care of her guardian, Constantine, until her 24th birthday when she inherits the family wealth. Willy's globetrotting lifestyle led to a lack of socialization and an alien temperament in Eva. Those around Eva must navigate her disappearances, misdirection, and falsehoods to find a place in her world.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Published in 1968, *Eva Trout* is Elizabeth Bowen's final novel. Though it was nominated for the 1970 Booker Prize, it received mixed reviews when it was released. For some, the novel was a complicated fiction without a clear direction or fully developed characters. For others it was an apt finale to a long literary career during which she wrote 11 novels and dozens of short stories.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Eva Trout

Eva is an unusual woman who disappears, or changes scenes abruptly and has no capacity for human emotion.

Constantine Ormeau

Constantine is Willy's business partner who becomes Eva's custodian and only constant after Willy's death.

Iseult Arble

Iseult is Eva's English teacher with whom Constantine places Eva.

Eric Arble

Eric is Iseult's husband and would-be lover of Eva.

Henry Dancey

Henry is the son of the local vicar. Despite his youth, he is Eva's confidante and the only person she could call a friend.

Jeremy Trout

Jeremy is Eva's ill-gotten son, who is deaf and mute. His physical limitations are a fit with Eva's psychological ones until he becomes the agent of her destruction.

PLOT

Eva's Origins: We are introduced to Eva as she drives her Jaguar with the Dancey family to see the place where she was "to have spent the honeymoon." This place looks like a facsimile of a castle and it is the school Eva attended as a child. Though she is the one driving the Jaguar, she is more akin to the children, particularly 12-year-old Henry, than she is to Mrs. Dancey. This journey sets an ominous tone for the misadventures that follow.

Larkins: Eva lives at Larkins, a former orchard owned by Iseult and Eric Arble. The Arbles agreed to lodge Eva in their home in an agreement with Eva's guardian, Constantine. He provides them with much needed payment in return for keeping the orphaned heiress safe and surrounded by trusted people.

Eva's abrupt exit: In London, Constantine receives a worrying visit from Eva, who intimates that she desires to leave Larkins immediately. Iseult goes to London to meet with him and discuss Eva's abrupt

plans for departure. We learn of Eva's parentage: Willy, a man who is lacking in ethics but rich in funds, and Cissie, who reportedly died in a plane crash when Eva was an infant. Constantine tries to convince Iseult that she must keep Eva at Larkins for everyone's benefit.

Two Schools: Iseult was an English teacher at Eva's second school, Lumleigh. Before she met Iseult however, she attended the "school" at the castle, an experimental place Eva's father bought. Willy bought the castle at the lake out of spite and jealousy, with the sole intention of keeping Kenneth, the intended headmaster of the school, away from Constantine. It was populated by children who were unwanted, and their education was not a concern, as long as the parents or the government paid for their presence. Many of the employees of the school thought of this place as a home, or facility, for these children and not a school at all. It closed quickly after its founding amid innumerable scandals. Through learning about this school, we begin to see Willy's nature. This is the environment in which Eva was shaped.

Disappearance from Larkins: Without warning, Eva does leave Larkins and takes up residence at a home of her own, Cathay. She has rented this lonely and forgotten property in North Foreland on the water from the caretaker, Mr. Denge, who is bewildered by her interest and occupation of the property. She uses Henry Dancy to hide and later sell her beloved Jaguar and flees from Larkins and from Iseult, who Eva believes has slighted her by inattention.

Surprise Visit: Eric shows up at Cathay unexpectedly. Theoretically he's there on Iseult's request to convince her to come back to Larkins. It's apparent that he has feelings for Eva which she does not reciprocate. While he goes upstairs to rest before he drives home, Constantine arrives unannounced. He sees Eric descend the stairs which fuels the rumor that Eric and Eva have had an affair.

Detente: Eva meets Iseult at Broadstairs, the setting for Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. There Eva apologizes for her role in their rift. Yet, at the end of their visit, she tells Iseult she will not be at Larkins for Christmas because in December she'll be "having a little child."

Elsinore: Eva has taken up residence in America and in Chicago, Eva runs into her former roommate at the castle, Elsinore. The last time she had seen Elsinore was when she was removed from the castle during a long illness. Eva assumed the frail child had died. Instead, she sees her as a woman, very much alive in America.

Jeremy's origins: At the house of Elsinore's friend, Bettie-Mae, Eva tells the group that she is on the way to find her son. Bettie-Mae's father, Mr. Anapoupolis, recognizes Eva's last name and her resemblance to Willy and is immediately suspicious of Eva's intentions. He surmises that her child is not lost at all, but that Eva has acquired a baby on the black market. Eva never confirms or denies his suspicions, yet after this encounter she receives a phone call at her hotel and speaks to the caller covertly. The strange phone call supports Mr. Anapoupolis' supposition.

Return to London: Eight years after she acquired Jeremy, the pair return to London and visit the places Eva had left behind in England. They meet Henry Dancy, who notices Jeremy is both deaf and mute. He has been raised as Eva was, as a rootless nomad without affection beyond Eva.

Trouble with the Arbles: Upon her return, Eva receives a letter from Eric and learns that he and his wife are no longer together. The rumor of her affair and her illegitimate child was too much for Iseult. Eric now has two children of his own with his new love and has seemingly moved on from Iseult.

Reunion: Eva sees Henry at Cambridge. Their connection is restored after this long absence and Henry is once again drawn into Eva's world.

Jeremy kidnapped: Back in London, Eva left Jeremy with his sculpture teacher at Primrose Hill while she went back to Paley's, the hotel where they were staying while in London. While eating lunch in the hotel lounge, Eva is called to the telephone and Iseult is on the other end. After Iseult's curious phone call, Eva returns to Primrose Hill and finds that Jeremy is gone. The teacher says he left willingly with a woman

whom the teacher describes as looking like Iseult. Jeremy is missing for hours and Eva is frantic. He returns just as mysteriously as he was taken.

Refuge in Paris: Eva no longer feels safe in London after Jeremy's kidnapping, so she takes him to Paris immediately. There she seeks therapy for Jeremy, but her ties to England and to Henry grow stronger.

Jeremy pulls away: As Jeremy's therapy continues, he grows closer to his teachers, the Bonnards. He was showing enormous promise under their tutelage. Gerard Bonnard warns "He requires...only, the company of an intelligent person. He is going through a phase of enlarged desires, of which all possible...should be met." He needs additional attention and is on the verge of becoming a liar, that is, another Eva, and she needs to allow him to grow outside of her harmful influence.

Eva to marry Henry: Knowing she cannot meet the challenge set by the Bonnards she arranges to leave Jeremy with them but devises a grand sendoff wherein Jeremy could say goodbye to her. Like Eva's acquisition of Jeremy to cover the lie she told to Iseult that she was pregnant, she concocts a scheme in which she will pretend to marry Henry and pretend this grand farewell will be a sendoff for their honeymoon.

Revolver: Back in London, Iseult meets Constantine and discusses her motivations for kidnapping Jeremy. She had to see the boy in person to dissuade her from the belief that he was Eric's illegitimate child. She claims that she is finished feeling anger towards Eva or Eric. She is carrying the revolver that she kept from her marriage to Eric and wishes to be rid of it. Because Constantine refuses to keep the gun in his office, Iseult decides to leave it with Eva's baggage at her hotel. Iseult's motivations for planting the gun are never made clear. She either leaves the revolver there as a symbol that her animosity towards Eva is now over, or she purposely leaves the gun in a place Jeremy is sure to find it.

Marriage plot: Eva and Henry visit the castle and have a more open conversation than they'd ever had. They discuss the impossibility of a relationship between them due to her enormous wealth and his young age. Eva then hatches a plan for Henry to pose as her "bridegroom...and appear to depart with [her] on a wedding journey, seen off by friends."

The end of Eva: Eva organizes this sham wedding and arranges for all her friends to see her and Henry off on their "marriage journey." Constantine, her former landlord Mr. Denge, and lastly the Arbles all assemble on the platform at Victoria Station. Jeremy is to join them when they arrive in a cab from their hotel under the care of the porter's wife Mrs. Caliber. All things converge. Jeremy finds Iseult's revolver with the baggage at the hotel and takes it to the platform without Mrs. Caliber's knowledge. Instead of joining the others, he gets away from his chaperone and begins waving the gun around on the platform as if he's playing with a replica like that he bought while with Iseult. Jeremy gives Iseult a "teasing smile" and as he sees Eva approaching him to say goodbye, he shoots Eva dead where she stands.

THEMES

Unreality The novel's narrator is unreliable as the reader is often presented with Eva's perspective on an event while, a little later, another character provides an alternate version of the same event. When Eva is at Larkins staying with the Arbles, she claims she is engaged and plans to spend her honeymoon at a castle-like home for children where she spent her youth. In a conversation with Eric Arble, long after the wedding was supposed to take place, Eva admits that she made the marriage and the honeymoon up. Neither the reader nor the characters who surround Eva are certain what the actual truth is. As Constantine explains to Iseult, "The Trouts have, one might say, a genius for unreality..." As another example, at the outset of the novel, one of the Dancy children asks if someone had drowned in the lake at the castle where she went to school. The question was not answered at the time. Yet, later in the novel, we learn that Elsinore, a sickly young girl, was placed as Eva's roommate in the castle. Her condition worsened and Eva awoke one day to find her gone. The implication for the reader is that Elsinore is the one who drowned in the lake. But Elsinore appears later in the novel, alive and well in Chicago. She reveals that she neither drowned nor had her body secreted away. Instead, she was taken home to receive additional treatment away from the school. This story returns at the end of the novel

when Henry and Eva go to the lake and the castle for a visit. As if answering the question from the beginning of the novel, she tells Henry matter-of-factly that “a very little girl tried to drown herself” in the lake.

Gothic atmosphere The gothic tradition draws on images of the supernatural, hauntings, and architecture reminiscent of the past. Bowen uses these elements and creates a sense of foreboding, particularly when describing the architecture in *Eva Trout*. The school at the castle has a haunted atmosphere. Willy Trout bought a place no one wanted and filled it with children no one wanted, dressing it up as a school rather than a castle. It seems like a cardboard version of a castle, appearing to be nothing more than a facade without any substance behind it. The children here are more like shadows than students. They take on the same qualities as the unreal castle. Eva is described as “unaware” of things around her. “She walked through everything, straight ahead, as a ghost is said to walk through walls.” Her entire persona is ghost-like in that she moves as if unconcerned with the impact of her presence.

Eva replicates this same atmosphere of abandonment in the home she buys for herself after she leaves Larkins. Cathay has long since been abandoned and is unsuitable for occupation. Covered in dust and alone for years, the house is in disrepair, yet Eva refuses to, or cannot, see the faults in this house. Those who visit her, can see what she does not.

Eric took in the drawing room, saying nothing. Its disreputability was what chiefly struck him. On top of that, the whole place was filmed with dust and, if not cold yet, made stale by used-up sunshine. Round the bay window were copious strewings of crumbs: at those, he could not restrain himself— “You’ll be bringing mice in.”

Cathay feels neglected; a home better suited to ghosts than humans.

Literary References Bowen alludes to other literary works in her novel, D.H. Lawrence, Shakespeare, Proust, Chekhov, Dickens, Flaubert, and Henry James are among the authors mentioned in the text. These references appear most frequently when Iseult, the English teacher and aspiring writer, drives the narrative. Iseult’s name is itself a reference to the Irish myth and Wagner’s opera, Tristan and Isolde which recalls an ill-fated romance between the two.

These literary references are at their strongest, perhaps not surprisingly, when Iseult waits for Eva in Broadstairs in Kent, the house that served as the inspiration for Dickens’ *Bleak House*. While overlooking Viking Bay, and recalling a particularly morbid moment in which a cattle ship had wrecked in the bay and animal carcasses had washed up on the shore below, Iseult contemplates not only Dickens, but Flaubert and James:

“Flaubert, reflected Iseult, would have been interested. Henry James, less so. What, now one came to think of it, had James, that Dickens really had not? Or if he had, what did it amount to?”

The constant allusion to other works is a reminder that the reader is submerged in an unreal world, a fiction of Eva’s making in which all play their own roles.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

EVA TROUT Eva is an heiress who has lived a strange life. Her mother died when she was young and was left under the care of her eccentric, millionaire father, Willy. With Willy she traveled the world but did not develop into an ordinary person. After her father’s suicide she was left in the care of her guardian, Constantine. Though she has access to enormous wealth, she floats through life in an unhuman way. She is a curious creature who causes damage to those around her and is unaware of her own power.

Unhuman Eva is a strange character who is often described as unhuman or foreign, as if unrecognizable by those around her. Physically, she is depicted as oversized and imposing, “ample” with “giant movements.” Her landlord, Mr. Denge, describes her as a “she-Cossack.”

This feral creature also acts unpredictably. When she moves to Cathay, she requires the help of Mr. Denge to simply boil water. On a larger scale, Eva disappears without regard for the people or things she leaves behind. As Henry describes it, her persona is “outsize, larger-than-life in every way. That’s how you fascinate the imagination.” Like her physicality, her actions are too big, unreasonable in scope.

Reckless After each of Eva's disappearances, she leaves a wake of ruin and unanswered questions. Eva abruptly left Larkins to strike out on her own at Cathay. She told no one she was leaving, save her 12-year-old friend, Henry. Eva is unaware of the collateral damage her frequent fugues leave behind. As Henry explains to Eva, it is easy to get swept up in Eva's intrigues but he will be left to handle the aftermath:

'That fatal old fascination of cooking a plot with Eva began to work. "Your fertile brain," he commented, "seems to have jumped two or three snags. For instance, I should have to turn up again. I'd be left to live with this thing — live it down, I mean. For the rest of my days.'

Untruthful Eva is never direct in her thoughts or actions. She lets the people around her make assumptions and fill in the blanks she purposely creates. Eva's presence at Larkins intensified the problems between Iseult and Eric. Her exit from Cathay without warning and the implication that she is pregnant with Eric's baby was the final straw. She left the Arbles and the Larkins estate and said she was going to have a baby, letting others assume the baby was Eric's. In reality, she and Eric were never together, and she buys a baby on the black market to continue the façade of her lie. Her innate need to lie and construct fantasies consumes all and causes great damage. She convinced Henry not to actually marry her, but to pose as her groom as if they were setting off for their honeymoon. As in scene that opens the novel, in which she tells the Dancy children that the castle was to be the site of her honeymoon, she concocts this false narrative of a potential marriage. She even goes so far as to hire people to pose as members of her wedding party. The end of Eva is the only way to end this barrage of fictions and intrigues. Jeremy kills her with the Iseult's discarded revolver, thereby breaking her cycle of lies and choosing a different future for himself.

ISEULT ARBLE Iseult is a brilliant literature teacher who sees promise in her pupil Eva. Her attachment to Eva leads to her own destruction and the creation of a hollowed-out shell of a woman who feeds on vengeance.

Brilliant Iseult is, by all accounts, a gifted teacher. She is well loved at Lumleigh and is first drawn to Eva's voracity to learn. Described as "dazzling" and "first-rate", Iseult creates a bond with her pupil and leaves an impression on Eva that takes hold and creates "a lifelong devotion."

"Throughout a lesson, her voice held a reined-in excitement — imparting knowledge, she conveyed its elatingness. The intellectual beauty of her sentences was informed by a glow; words she spoke sounded new-minted, unheard before."

She could have taught anything and feels she would reach Eva in a way no one else could. Yet, she found Eva too late in Eva's development, and instead of changing Eva, Eva destroys Iseult's brilliant glow.

Damaged After Eric's betrayal and Eva's perceived complicity, Iseult leaves her life behind. She separates from Eric and lets her warmth and generosity fade. Her very appearance changes, wearing her hair differently and dressing with a new aesthetic. She also changes her mannerisms. The new Iseult is often described as a "Zola-type harlot" with dark hair with a low fringe "like a Knossos dancer's or in a Zola film, so that one could not see what was underneath." Constantine notices this marked difference and asks, "Why are you becoming such a tramp?" Iseult explains, "I've undergone an emotional hysterotomy and am the better."

She is utterly changed now from the person she once was. She takes on Eva's uncaring affect and walks through her new life in a calculating and perverse manner, caring not for the harm she inflicts on others.

Vengeful Iseult is separated from Eric but refuses to divorce him. As Constantine explains, Eric won't file for desertion and will not file for a divorce without Iseult's consent. Despite Eric's new life, he still feels connected to Iseult. She is aware of his predicament with his new companion, who is Norwegian and living without papers in England until she can marry Eric. But Iseult continues to let him suffer the consequences of his perceived love affair with Eva. She also kidnaps Jeremy in order to get to know the actual boy who had haunted her imagination for the previous seven years. Eva only realizes it was Iseult who took him from the description Ms. Applewithe gives Eva of the woman Jeremy left with. Iseult confirms her deed obliquely in a letter to Constantine and then fully to Constantine's partner, Father Clavering-Haight.

“My wonder about the boy was nothing so internal as an obsession; it grew outward into a desire to see him. I knew I would stop at nothing to satisfy, though for a long time I couldn't see how I could hope to.”

What the two discussed during their four-hour jaunt is never made clear, though Jeremy does buy a toy revolver for himself that foreshadows Eva's demise.

CONSTANTINE ORMEAU Constantine is entrusted with the guardianship of Eva until she turns 24 and comes into her inheritance. Through his entanglements with Willy and then Eva, he maintains his ethical core and becomes the moral sounding board for those around him. He is at once mysterious and one of the few who can see through the illusions that swirl around Eva.

Moral Constantine is ever-present in the minds of everyone in Eva's circle, yet he is rarely seen. He is the moral center of the strange life of Eva Trout. Eva does not befriend many people but is wholly devoted, in her own way, to the friends she does have and is wounded deeply when they don't return this devotion. For these reasons, Constantine serves as her arbiter who investigates those with whom she surrounds herself. He first inspected Larkins and the Arbles before she took up residence with them. Though he only physically saw them once before she moved in, he remained in contact with the Arbles, particularly Iseult. In lieu of his physical presence, his letter-writing maintains his connection as well as his desire to keep a keen and watchful eye on Eva. This power is deeply felt by Iseult, who declares “I would not for anything shirk your trust” in a letter to him. Through a tumultuous life with Willy and now Eva, he has done his best to remain a steady constant for Eva. He is the keeper of knowledge and provides cover for her abrupt nature where he can.