“What is Concatenation?”: An Existentialist Reading of Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes

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Abstract
This article reads Elizabeth Bowen’s last novel Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes from the perspective of Sartre’s existentialism. Two of the major characters in the novel, Eva Trout and Iseult Smith, represent the two poles of Sartre’s conception of “bad faith”, staging two different “fundamental projects”. Eva recklessly ignores the conditions that she finds herself in, while Iseult always considers herself a victim of external circumstances. Over the course of the novel, Eva’s character undergoes a drastic change, as hinted in the title, such that she establishes a new balance between “facticity” and “transcendence”, leaving behind her illusion of absolute freedom. The question that Eva asks in the final moments of her life, namely “What is concatenation?”, invites everyone witnessing her death, including the readers, to realize the importance of conceiving of events in one’s life not as independent and separate units but rather as a whole that takes its character from the way those units articulate with one another.

Key Words: Elizabeth Bowen, Eva Trout, Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism, Bad Faith

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“Zincirlenme Nedir?”:
Eva Trout, or Changing Scenes’in Varoluşçu Bir Okuması

Öz

Anahtar Kelimeler: Elizabeth Bowen, Eva Trout, Jean-Paul Sartre, Varoluşçu-luk, Kötü İnanç/Niyet

Elizabeth Bowen closes her last novel Eva Trout with an unexpected and difficult question: “What is concatenation?” This question asked by the main character of the novel is only one of the many questions that Bowen very successfully weaves into the narrative of Eva Trout. The abundance of elaborate philosophical questions is a distinctive feature of this novel, and its philosophical tenor marks an important shift from the stylistic and thematic concerns of her previous novels. While some critics consider the novel’s fragmentary narrative structure with its allegedly inadequately developed characters a regression from her earlier works, others celebrate the novel as a magnificent way of concluding her opus. What is beyond dispute is that Eva Trout raises interesting questions that proliferate as one delves into the multi-layered structure of events revolving around the socially awkward heroine Eva. Focusing on the mundane life of a relatively small number of characters over a period of nearly nine years, Bowen ventures to distance herself from what is she is best at
and tries something new: there is no war or other major political event that serves as a pretext or context for the fragmentary plot of the novel. However, this change does not make *Eva Trout* less political at all. At an altogether different level, Elizabeth Bowen sets out to question the significance of decisions that one makes on a daily basis as well as the accumulating effect of these decisions on one’s life. Bowen shows how these seemingly personal decisions interact with the socio-political context one lives in. Bringing Eva’s aberrant language to the fore, Bowen points to the transversal nature of language as a dynamic element that cuts through and combines personal and political spheres.

The changes in Elizabeth Bowen’s later work could be considered a result of the devastating effects of World War II. After the shock and desperation brought about by the war, many philosophers as well as writers started to search for ways to face and understand the consequences of the immense destruction of several European capitals and the high human death toll. The concepts of responsibility, forgiveness, and death as well as the limits of representation assumed a crucial role in the post-war intellectual and academic circles. Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, first published in 1943, became one of the most influential books of the post-war period as it proposed a new framework to deal with many of the perennial questions of philosophy such as identity, authenticity and freedom. In this paper, I argue that Elizabeth Bowen’s final novel *Eva Trout* also responds to the philosophical concerns of this period by setting up a mundane but elaborate stage on which the pressing political and philosophical problems of the time are posed and responded to by the characters in the novel. For this purpose, I mainly focus on Bowen’s characterization of Eva Trout and Iseult Smith as two different modes of existence. As the novel is built upon a comparison of different modes of existence rather a simple analysis of identities and demographical characteristics, I also claim that Bowen’s novel lends itself more to an existentialist reading than a “poststructuralist” one.

John Coates’ (1998) analysis of *Eva Trout* also points to the necessity of diverging from reading the novel as a monolithic critique of modern society. According to Coates, contrary to the claim that
the “modern malaise” of miscommunication haunts the story from the beginning to the end, the novel juxtaposes two opposite modes of communication namely, the cold and aversive communication of the Arbles vs. the affectionate and embracing dialogue of the Dancey household (p. 63). Coates’ comparative insight can be extended to Eva and the other major characters of the novel, each of whom embodies not only a different way of communicating with the world around them but also a different and differing mode of existence.

Before undertaking an existentialist reading of the novel, I would like to go over the major events in Eva’s life. The novel opens with Eva, Mrs. Dancey and her four children visiting a lake in the vicinity of Larkins, where Eva has been staying after her father’s death, upon the permission of Eva’s legal guardian Constantine. The lady of Larkins, Iseult Smith, is a former teacher of Eva’s. Although Eva used to like Mrs. Smith back in the school days, she does not presently enjoy her stay at Larkins and therefore spends most of her time with the Dancey family. Eva’s wealthy father wants her to access his fortune only after she is twenty-five years old; however, despite being only one year away from her twenty-fifth birthday, Eva does not look mature enough to manage her father’s inheritance either to the Arbles or to Constantine. Trying to distance herself from Iseult and Constantine, Eva decides to rent a house in Kent, where she comes up with the lie that she is pregnant. In an attempt to cover up for her lie, Eva travels to the US, where she purchases a child. Eva’s lie has dramatic consequences for the Arbles household as Iseult Smith suspects that the father of Eva’s child could be her husband Eric. Eva comes back from the US with her child Jeremy, who suffers from hearing disability. In the last part of the novel, Eva develops romantic feelings for Mrs. Dancey’s son, Henry, who is a university student at the time. While Henry does not seem to respond to Eva’s interest in the beginning, he unexpectedly confesses to having feelings for Eva at the Victoria station, where Eva and Henry would leave for honeymoon. Eva’s excitement does not last very long as Eva’s son, Jeremy, shoots his mother dead by accidentally firing a gun.

A closer examination of the plot would reveal two important series of events affecting one another and the overall course of the plot.
in the novel. There is a long series of events that Eva finds herself exposed to unexpectedly or by accident. Jeremy’s matricide, the death of Eva’s mother, the closing of the first school Eva went to, Jeremy’s turning out to be deaf, Henry’s declaration of love at the Victoria station etc. are examples to such events. However, these unexpected situations are intricately connected to another series of willful actions, which play as important a role in the novel as the unforeseen events: Willy Trout’s suicide, Eva’s desire to continue her education in an English boarding school, Eva’s decision to be a mother and her trip to the US are some of these willful actions. The interwoven character of the two series makes it impossible to regard any of the characters in the novel, including Eva, either as a victim of what happens around and in spite of them or a hero that is in full control of their life. Eva definitely does not live an enviable life, but the question of who is responsible for her situation is a rather tricky one. His father? Constantine, his father’s lover? Iseult, her teacher and former temporary guardian? Above all, who is responsible for Eva’s death? Iseult? Jeremy? Jeremy is too young to be held accountable for his actions. Is it Eric then, the initial owner of the gun with which Eva is shot? Or is it Eva herself, secretly wishing for her own death?

The novel, however, does not pose the question of responsibility simply in relation to the harms one may cause. Bowen does not seem to view help as a necessarily positive influence on others. Helping hands are never exempted from an analysis of the consequences of their well-meant actions. The boy who drags out Eva’s roommate from the lake in the castle is not completely happy with what he did: “She knew what she was doing, but I? A reflex. It was disgusting. What fundamentally am I, a Boy Scout?” (Bowen, 2003, p. 54). Similarly, thinking back how inexplicably Eva was fond of her, Iseult cannot help questioning herself: “She did not know what I was doing; but did I?”(Bowen, 2003, p. 60). Whether Iseult Smith’s giving a hand to Eva could also be considered a reflex is a disputable point, but it is certain that her help does not make things any better.

These interrelated questions of responsibility and chance testify to an essential link between Bowen’s subtle narration and the Sartrian problematic of freedom, authenticity, and transcendence. Sartre’s
philosophical vocabulary in *Being and Nothingness* may help us map the ethical trajectories that the characters in *Eva Trout* follow. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (1992) distinguishes between two types of being, namely the being of the object of consciousness and the being of the consciousness itself (p. 24). Being-in-itself as the object of consciousness stands for the stable, unchanging, self-identical aspect of things. It is the set of factual givens that impose themselves on a particular person or situation at a certain time. Being-for-itself, on the other hand, is the being of the consciousness itself, and it stands for the changing, non-identical, fluid aspect of things (p. 136). For Sartre, the most important characteristic of being-for-itself is its capacity to negate. According to Sartre, the complexity of the human subject stems from the co-existence of the two types of being on the level of human subjectivity in a mode of perpetual conflict. Being-in-itself moves in the direction of accepting the factual givens of the situation, while being-for-itself *negates* and *transcends* the situation as such. The most important philosophical consequence of this framework is that human beings are never totally determined by the situations they find themselves in. Being-for-itself or the consciousness as such always provides individuals with a corridor of freedom that leads the way out of the impositions of contextual determinations. In other words, individuals are never characterized as fixed identities that drift along a path drawn in advance. Every situation structurally involves a kernel of freedom which shows itself in the form of consciousness’s negation of identity. In Sartre’s view, then, freedom is not about one’s ability to attain one’s own goals. These goals might remain unachievable for a variety of factors; however, the individual remains free insofar as they are able to choose by virtue of their consciousness defined by “the freedom to transcend what is by grasping what is not” (Anderson, 1993, p.24). In the absence of an absolute rule of identity, an individual can act authentically or inauthentically depending on how they balance the “facticity” of the situation against the “transcendence” of their consciousness (Sartre, 1992, p. 98). For Sartre, authenticity consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate” (Sartre, 1995, p. 80).
From the perspective of Sartrian phenomenology, Eva Trout and Iseult Smith differ in their mode of existence. Eva represents the transcendence of given situations in contrast with accepting them as they are. She makes her decisions on the basis of a negation of the situational givens of her life. From the very beginning of the novel, we clearly see that Eva does whatever she wants to. She leaves the house without telling her guardian where she is going and when she would come back. Mrs. Dancey points out that Eva is very “independent” compared to everybody around her (Bowen, 2003, p. 74). As a 24-year-old girl who is only one year away from the age that will entitle her to take possession of the fortune of her deceased father, Eva rarely gives a second thought to what is expected of her. She completely ignores the factual givens of the situation and acts as if these givens have no relevance to what she should be doing. Her decision to be a mother and to go to the US does not show any concern for the implications and ramifications that these decisions may have on her own life as well as on those of others. Especially in the first section of the novel, Eva’s negation of “facticity” reaches an extreme level in her manifestation of her character.

Iseult Smith, on the other hand, proceeds to the opposite direction and often confines herself into the givens of the situation. Despite her lifelong interest in writing her own novel, she continues to content herself with translating from French, because she thinks that writing a novel would prevent her from performing the roles she is expected to play in the house, especially as the temporary guardian of Eva Trout. She finds an external cause to blame for all her other unrealized dreams and disappointments. For her, it is always other people’s doing that prevents her from getting what she wants. She considers herself completely determined and enslaved by what happens around her. For her unsuccessful marriage, for instance, Iseult Smith comes to see Eva as the main culprit. In this sense, Iseult Smith is characterized by a constant denial of her own freedom, which makes her regard the facticity of the situations she finds herself in as the absolute limit which she cannot and should not challenge. For Sartre, freedom always involves a certain detachment from the necessities of the situation; however, responding to the necessities of the situation remains Iseult Smith’s top priority.
Despite the radical difference in the respective attitudes of Eva Trout and Iseult with regard to facticity and transcendence, from the perspective of Sartrian ethics, both characters suffer from bad faith, albeit in different ways. Sartre’s concept of bad faith can be defined as “a lived misrecognition of one’s own freedom” (Heter, 2006, p.63). Sartre (1992) carefully distinguishes between two types of bad faith (p. 96-112). In its most common form, bad faith is the renunciation of the structural freedom that everyone possesses by virtue of having consciousness. A person who suffers from this type of bad faith forgets that all decisions he or she makes actually reflect a free choice. Renunciation of this freedom also helps the decision-making individual deny responsibility for his or her actions. In other words, people suffering from the first type of bad faith use their alleged lack of freedom as a shield of innocence to avoid any responsibility for their own unfulfilled needs and disappointments as well as for the misery they inflict on others. Iseult Smith’s bad faith is a perfect example of this first type. From a Sartrian point of view, regardless of how demanding the conditions may seem to her, her decision not to write her own novel appears as a choice that she herself makes. The bad faith of Iseult Smith is also vividly manifested in her belief that Eva is the main reason for her unhappy relationship with her husband Eric. The second type of bad faith is perhaps less common, but it is exactly the mode of existence Eva embodies in the novel. The second type is characterized by an illusion of absolute freedom. Especially in the first section of the novel, as a result of her complete disregard for the givens of the situations she finds herself in, Eva comes to overlook the complexity of external factors and makes her decisions on the basis of her supposedly absolute freedom. However, for Sartre (1992), structural freedom of the consciousness is pointless when the connection to the facticity of the situation is totally broken. Consciousness is always “consciousness of something,” (p. 23); negation is always negation of something. Disregarding the object of her consciousness, Eva’s behavior reflects a logic of pure negation.

Eva’s existential difference from Iseult also shows itself in Eva’s “outlandish, cement-like conversational style” (Bowen, 2003, p. 10). What Iseult Smith dislikes the most about Eva’s speech is Eva’s repeated use of the adverb “however.”
'I shall fine you sixpence for each time you say 'however'!
'My father will have to send me more pocket-money!' … ‘What,’ she asked, ‘is the matter with 'however'?
‘Oh, it is pompous, unnatural-sounding, it’s wooden, it’s deadly, it’s hopeless, it’s shutting-off—the way you use it. It’s misbegotten!’ (Bowen, 2003, p. 64)

Eva’s excessive use of this word of disjunction is also a proof of her excessively negative attitude in situations. Eva’s ‘however’s enact the very rupture in the series of causal links between the contextual givens and Eva’s extra-contextual proclivities. She thinks and acts in the way “however” operates, that is, “disjectedly” (Bowen, 2003, p. 42). Eva’s way of thinking often irritates Iseult Smith. In fact, for Iseult, Eva should first learn how to think.

‘I should like you to think, though. You have thoughts, I know, and sometimes they’re rather startling, but they don’t connect yet.’
‘Are they startling?’ asked the gratified owner.
‘They startle you, don’t they?– But try joining things together: this, then that, then the other. That’s thinking; at least, that’s beginning to think.’ …
‘Then what?’ … ‘Why, however?’
‘Honestly, how can I tell you? It is what is done, Eva. Try–’ (Bowen, 2003, p. 54).

Thinking, for Iseult Smith, is a matter of sequencing thoughts and putting them in good order, because this order produces a chart of connections for the thinker to be consistent. The fragmentary structure of Eva’s thinking, however, does not lead to a weak memory or a fallacious reasoning. In fact, it turns out that her memories of the castle, for instance, are fresher than those of her roommate Elsinore. What her style of thinking inhibits is rather the connection among states of affair and between Eva’s behavior and states of affair. Iseult Smith’s style, on the contrary, involves a smooth ordering of thoughts and a solid connection between her conduct and what happens around her.

Sartre’s concept of fundamental project can also provide important insights for explaining the changes the characters in the novel undergo. According to Sartre, no decision can be understood in iso-
lation. There is a plane on which all our actions unite and assume a contingent identity. Although the being-for-itself stands for the fluid and unstable side of our being, it is also defined by a goal that gives us a sense of direction. It is on the basis of this unity of actions that we can distinguish between the characters of different people (Sartre, 1992, p. 608-612). Sartre calls the unity of actions the “fundamental project” of the person in question. While Iseult Smith’s fundamental project is shaped by her cultivation of her being-in-itself at the expense of her being-for-itself, Eva’s project presents a complete detachment of for-itself from the in-itself to the point of her assuming an unrealistic absolute freedom which, practically, is never possible. One’s fundamental project is also open to change. In a certain sense, the main difference between the first and second sections of the novel is the important transformation that Eva’s fundamental project undergoes. In the second section of the novel, Eva seems to distance herself from the bad faith she suffered from before her flight to the US. When she comes back to England after her 8-year-long stay in the US, she is no longer a lonely, independent woman but rather mother of a deaf child. Her relationship with her guardians and friends also undergoes a drastic change after her return. She is now more sensitive to the influence of external factors on her life. For instance, in a conversation with Father Clavering–Haight, Eva talks of Iseult Smith grimly.

She desisted from teaching me. She abandoned my mind. She betrayed my hopes, having led them on. She pretended love, to make me show myself to her—then, thinking she saw all, she turned away (Bowen, 2003, p. 203).

Eva feels “betrayed” and “abandoned”, but most importantly, she thinks that Iseult, by losing interest in her, sent her back “to be nothing.” Likewise, after Constantine’s inquiry at Paley’s whether time has treated her kindly, Eva thinks to herself that

Constantine was not to be thought in terms of plumage, like him or not. Display had never been his method of working. His physical smooth collectedness, imperviousness, his look of being once and for all assembled, and staying thus, accounted in great part for his effects on
others, whether or not diabolical, and with that, for his extraordinary lastingness in their memories. The history—or was it the legend?—of his cruelties had as source his huelessness, his “vanishingness” when to be vanished from could be torment, his semi-deliberate, semi-pouting enunciation of (it might be terrible) words used (Bowen, 2003, p. 182).

Eva’s analysis of Constantine shows her increasing awareness of how others might have affected her decisions and her overall life at large. Eva is no longer the reckless, nonchalant lady she used to be before leaving for the US. This change of perspective also implies her increased willingness to take more responsibility for her deeds. In a way, she understands that she can never really be free without addressing the constraints of her life.

Two major events in the second section of the novel crystallize the significance of this change in perspective for Eva’s life. In the first event, upon Henry’s affectionate statement at the station that he genuinely loves her, Eva starts to cry.

Something took place: a bewildering, brilliant, blurring filling up, swimming and brimming over; then, not a torrent from the eyes but one, two, three, four tears, each hesitating, surprised to be where it was, then wandering down. […] “Look what is happening to me!” exulted Eva (Bowen, 2003, p. 300).

This is reportedly the first moment ever that Eva cries in her whole life. In her analysis of this exceptional moment, Ellmann (2003) interprets Eva’s emotional breakdown as the failure of her previous renunciation of depths (p. 222). She contends that Eva’s crying provides her with the inner life that she always longed for but kept renouncing. However, another instance in the novel that bears witness to a tension between surfaces and depths does not support Ellmann’s interpretation. This is when Eva comments on the artworks exhibited in the National Portrait Gallery, rejecting that depths make human life more real than the life of a portrait.

[T]hey were all “pictures.” Images. “Nothing but a deck of cards”?—not quite, but nearly enough to defeat Eva. …They were on show only. Lordily suffering themselves to be portrayed, they’d presented a cool core of resistance even to the most penetrating artist. … Nothing was
to be learned from them (if you excepted learning that nothing was to be learned). Insofar as they had an effect on the would-be student, it was a malign one: every soul Eva knew became no longer anything but a portrait. There was no “real life”; no life was more real than this. This she had long suspected. She now was certain (2003, p. 216).

Eva’s criticism of superficiality does not amount to a rejection of depths. According to her reasoning, although portraits are nothing but a surface, they are never “just” pictures. They have a profound effect on their spectators. Just like art students who, in their quest of becoming an original artist, cannot but be influenced by the masters that preceded them, Eva acknowledges the impossibility of disregarding the influence of other people on her life in her quest of becoming who she is. Trying to create a portrait of her own, Eva will have to “face” others. In this regard, she does not change her mind as to how essentially superficial everything is but rather realizes that dismissing superficiality might not be the right point of departure for her existential quest: it should rather be faced, addressed, acknowledged and, perhaps, embraced.

Likewise, Eva’s tears at the train station appear more as an indication of Eva’s becoming more able to come to terms with, and in this particular moment, being rather overwhelmed by the demands of the facticity of situations. Her cry has more to do with her becoming responsive to the present moment rather than a renunciation of superficiality. This emotional discharge is a proof that Eva finally starts distinguishing between various surfaces. Rather than a negation of superficiality, the tears are an affirmation of difference and change within the framework of the superficiality of things. This is why Eva describes her tears as something that “happens” to her rather than something she herself does actively or intentionally.

John Coates (1998) aptly argues that most of the feminist and poststructuralist interpretations of Eva Trout downplay the significance of the ethical concern the novel is infused with (p. 60). In contrast with these interpretations, the questions of how characters should act or should have acted clearly dominate the novel from the very beginning to the end. From an existentialist point of view, Eva Trout and Iseult Smith constitute two different modes of existence.
crystallizing the two polar opposites of bad faith, namely an illusion of absolute freedom and an illusion of absolute dependency respectively. The downside of his ethical analysis is, however, that it portrays Eva primarily as a victim of others in the last instance. He traces Eva’s odd character to her father’s careless and unaffectionate upbringing (p. 68). Similarly, for Smith (2009), Eva serves as the pharmakos of this little group of people who make her into a scapegoat “lest she expose the lies by which here more socially associates shape their ‘truths’” (p. 246). Both of these accounts overlook the extent to which Eva changes other people’s lives as much as they change hers. As a matter of fact, no character in the novel fully fits into the role of victim as the complex relations of mutual influence make it impossible to assign such a passive role to any of them. What makes Eva Trout an interesting story is the subtle equilibrium between how both victimized and empowered the characters feel vis-à-vis the situations they come across. In Eva Trout, Bowen keeps contemplating the question of responsibility, but this questioning is meant to problematize the concept rather than give a quick answer to it by identifying good and bad characters or victims.

The most striking moment in Bowen’s problematization of responsibility takes place in the final pages of the novel when Jeremy accidentally shoots her mother dead. Eva’s last words, which come in the form of an unanswered question, cannot be considered a coincidence, given Bowen’s proliferating questions throughout the novel. The sequence begins with Constantine making a short “speech” wishing Eva and Henry happiness.

On behalf of all, I wish you a pleasant future. The future as we know, will resemble the past in being the result, largely, of a concatenation of circumstances. Many of our best moments, as well as our worst, are fortuitous. (Let us hope that only the best moments await this bridal pair.) I do not say that there is no method in human madness. Our affections could not, I suppose, survive—as they do– were they entirely divorced from reason, though the tie is often a rather tenuous one. […] Let this sunshine we stand in be a good omen! Things may break well for you; that has been known to happen. Er–life stretches ahead. May a favourable concatenation of circumstances … No, here I become a trifle tied up, I think. That is enough. –Henry, you’d better kiss Eva.
Henry did so, lightly on the cheek.
“Constantine,” asked Eva, what is ‘concatenation’?
Her last words (Bowen, 2003, p. 301).

The question Eva asks relates to the recent series of events that have affected her fundamental project insofar as “concatenation” in Constantine’s formulation seems to stand for the way factual givens of one’s life accumulates over time. Eva’s change of perspective after returning from the US already reflects a growing concern on her part about her past and other people’s influences on her life. However, at the very moment Eva is finally to pose the crucial question of the concatenation of these influences, she is being silenced by the force of the present situation she could not even respond to. Death, as an unexpected event beyond her control, is what makes this question possible; but, at the same time, prohibiting any answer to the question whatsoever, it makes the question impossible. At this point in the novel, the witnesses of Eva’s unfortunate death, including the readers themselves, are invited to rethink the sequence of events in Eva’s life as well as their accumulating impact on her. Eva’s question is not simply of what she did to others or what others did to her but rather of how all of her experiences in life have concatenated.

From this perspective, Eva’s unfortunate death can no longer be considered a pure accident. Upon seeing the gun in Jeremy’s hands at the station, Eric has difficulty figuring out how Jeremy ended up playing with the gun he once had but almost forgot about.

I let things slide, day after day. That old souvenir. Meant to take it out, have a look at it, do a job on it–never brought myself to. How did you ever know that it was in the house, now I come to think? But one thing I’m certain of: there was one in it. Keep still. Don’t startle him (Bowen, 2003, p. 299).

Being disturbed by Jeremy’s dangerous entertainment, Iseult intends to intervene: “Eric, I think I could get it away from him.” But she never does. In a certain sense, it is because of Iseult’s negligence that Jeremy could access the gun. As much as she may not have intended to cause Eva’s death, her lack of attention plays an important
role in it. In fact, she is not completely oblivious to the potential dangers of the gun either. In her explanation of why she took the gun in exchange for the typewriter he left to Eric, she states that it may be a matter of “Hedda Gabler complex” (Bowen, 2003, p. 212). However, if Iseult is partly responsible for Eva’s death, she is no more responsible than her husband Eric, the original owner of the gun, who also does not make a move to take the gun from Jeremy. So is it only Jeremy to blame for his unintended murder of his mother? Although he is the person who fires the gun, he does not have a single bit of intention to injure anybody, let alone kill his own mother. The answer to the question of who is responsible for Eva’s death keeps eluding us. Looking for someone responsible, we only find an unfavorable concatenation of events that make everybody both responsible and innocent in varying degrees.

*Eva Trout* represents a stylistic digression in Bowen’s oeuvre, through which Bowen not only addresses but also reframes important contemporary philosophical questions of her time in an engaging way. From a Sartrian point of view, *Eva Trout* stages the difference between the fundamental projects of Eva Trout and Iseult Smith. The most important difference between the respective fundamental projects of Eva and Iseult shows itself in their conversational style and mode of thinking. Eva’s excessive use of “however”, which bothers Iseult, is a clear sign of her inclination to detach herself from a causal series and transcend the situation. The present existentalist interpretation differs from the existing literature on *Eva Trout* in two respects. First, contrary to what some critics such as Coates and Smith suggest, Eva Trout does not appear as a passive victim in the story. This victimizing reading of Eva Trout misses both how big Eva’s influence on other characters is and how independently she makes her decisions especially in the first part of the novel. Second, the tension between surfaces and depths in the novel now appears as a function of the tension between authenticity and bad faith. Contrary to the common interpretation of Eva’s comments on the pictures in the National Portrait Gallery and her emotional breakdown at the train station as her renunciation of superficiality, the significance of Eva’s tears lies in Eva’s coming to terms with the facticity of situations...
and her being more able to address contextual demands, implying a step towards a more authentic life. Elizabeth Bowen ends her last novel with the question of concatenation; and as a largely overlooked work, *Eva Trout* itself remains open to alternative concatenations of questions and readings.

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