

Article

Sexual “Non-Occurrence”: Celibacy in Elizabeth Bowen’s Interwar Fiction

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Abstract

This article examines the structuring tension between the occurrence and non-occurrence of sexual events in Elizabeth Bowen’s novels *Friends and Relations* (1931) and *The House in Paris* (1935), arguing that the conflict between sex and celibacy operates as a central narrative motor in her interwar fiction. Reframing this dynamic through the related distinction between occurrence, non-occurrence, and event, I suggest that Bowen’s novels are organized not simply around sexual acts or their absence, but around the question of whether sexual possibility is allowed to consolidate into narrative event or withheld within a structure of suspension. In *Friends and Relations*, sexual possibility remains imminent yet is repeatedly deferred, producing a narrative governed by a “non-occurrence” rather than event. In *The House in Paris*, by contrast, sexual occurrence is permitted but emerges as catastrophe, consequence, and irreversible temporal rupture. This opposition is represented through Janet (*Friends and Relations*) and Karen (*The House in Paris*), who embody two regimes of narrative temporality: one in which sexual possibility is withheld from event, and one in which it becomes an irreversible event. Across both novels, celibacy and sexuality are interdependent forces determining the passage, or refusal of passage, from occurrence to event.

Keywords: Elizabeth Bowen; interwar; celibacy; event; occurrence; non-occurrence; *Friends and Relations*; *The House in Paris*; marriage plot

1. Introduction

The tension between the occurrence and non-occurrence of sex structures plot, character, and affective economy in Elizabeth Bowen’s interwar fiction. In this article, I argue that in *Friends and Relations* (1931) and *The House in Paris* (1935), this tension is not incidental but formative: it shapes both narrative trajectory and the emotional worlds of Bowen’s characters. Bowen’s novels make visible that sex and its absence are not merely practices, but structuring forces that inform interior life, social constraint, and desire itself.

Bowen criticism often frames this tension through the dichotomy of innocence and experience.¹ I propose, however, that placing the sex/no-sex axis alongside the distinction between *occurrence*, that is, something that takes place at the level of action or perception, *non-occurrence*, understood as its suspension or deferral, and *event*, an occurrence that is narratively framed, given significance, and made consequential, reveals a deeper, more dynamic force at work: a logic of celibacy that is neither the simple absence of sex nor a position defined solely in opposition to it. What emerges is a model in which sexuality is bound to narrative formation itself: to the question of whether an occurrence becomes an event or is withheld from that transformation. Attending to celibacy, following Benjamin



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Kahan's call to think about celibacy as a sexual formation, allows us to see how Bowen's novels register not a void but a field of relational possibility. Kahan alerts us to the slipperiness and productive instability of celibacy—not as sex's opposite, nor as a degraded version of sexual expression, but as a sexual formation in "its own right," one that resists simple categorization and instead functions alongside, around, and across sexual acts. In this sense, celibacy is not an absence to be decoded; it is, like sex, a socially and historically produced modality of desire and gender-bending (Kahan 2013, pp. 2, 12).

Bowen's earliest novels *The Hotel* (1927) and *The Last September* (1929) are works of restraint; they keep at bay the dangerous and life-altering power of sexual passion and consummation, leaving their heroines outside of the marriage plot. Both Sydney in *The Hotel* and Lois in *The Last September* toy with the idea of marriage, but ultimately the two novels follow a similar plot determined by two factors: neither Sydney nor Lois is in love with the Reverend James Milton or Gerald, respectively, and the prospective relationships are not allowed to move toward a heterosexual conclusion under the ominous power of the older female "protector": Mrs. Kerr in *The Hotel* and Lady Naylor in *The Last September*. Only from *To the North* (1932) onwards, romantic passion is permitted to reach sexual consummation, which, however, leads to disastrous consequences for the characters, who experience heartbreak, abandonment and even death.

What is at stake here is less the failure of the marriage plot than its transformation, as this article argues, and its co-existence along the celibacy plot. In Bowen's early novels, the movement toward heterosexual closure is structurally displaced by triadic configurations that sustain desire without resolving it, producing a form of plotting in which celibacy and non-consummation are not endpoints but organizing principles. Kahan's concept of the "celibacy plot" drawing on René Girard's model of triangular desire as well as Leslie Fiedler's account of "innocent homosexuality," offers a productive framework for approaching these structures as generative rather than repressive. Desire circulates through a third term that both enables and defers its consolidation into event, producing a narrative logic in which sexual non-consummation is not a failure but a mode of plotting (Kahan 2013, pp. 28, 48–52). As I will go on to show, this emphasis on mediation and the constitutive role of the third also resonates with Maud Ellmann's account of Bowen's triadic desire, where the third figure is not incidental but structurally decisive in both enabling and destabilizing heterosexual relations.

Reading Bowen's work in reverse chronological order, the apparent innocence of these earlier heroines appears "distressingly intact" (Ellmann 2003, p. 70). Yet this innocence is less a lack than a structural condition: a mode of suspended sexuality that sustains narrative without allowing it to resolve into event. For Kahan, celibacy can function as a form of resistance to compulsory sexuality, as a period in between sexual activity, and as a political self-identification that unsettles normative sexual teleologies (Kahan 2013). In Bowen's fiction, these dimensions operate simultaneously, revealing configurations of desire and social constraint that cannot be reduced to repression or sublimation. If sexual occurrence in *The House in Paris* produces rupture, consequence, and irreversible event, then celibacy in *Friends and Relations* illuminates the multiple valences of non-occurrence—as affective suspension, social organization, and refusal of event formation.

This article therefore moves from *Friends and Relations* to *The House in Paris* in order to trace the shift from non-occurrence to occurrence, and from unrealized futurity to catastrophic event as a governing dynamic in Bowen's writing. Central to this movement is the contrast between two figures: Janet (*Friends and Relations*) whose affective and sexual positioning produces non-occurrence as structured suspension, and Karen (*The House in Paris*), whose surrender to sexual occurrence produces event and consequence. Rather than opposing presence and absence, these figures articulate two regimes of narrative

temporality: one in which sexual possibility is withheld from event (Janet), and one in which it is realized as irreversible transformation (Karen). Across both novels, however, celibacy and sexuality remain structurally entangled: they operate not as opposites, but as interdependent forces that determine whether occurrence becomes event or remains suspended within the horizon of unrealized futurity.

Before turning to these close readings, I first establish the theoretical coordinates of this framework by drawing on Hayden White and Fredric Jameson's accounts of the destabilization of the "event" in modernist writing, and by foregrounding a distinction between occurrence, non-occurrence, and event as narratological and affective categories. This theoretical groundwork allows for a more precise account of how Bowen's fiction reorganizes narrative temporality and sexual meaning. Only after this do I return to Bowen's novels in more detail, beginning with *Friends and Relations* and then moving to *The House in Paris*.

2. Between (Non-)Occurrence and Event: Theorizing Celibacy

In Hayden White's account of modernism, the category of the "event" is no longer self-evident, stable, or narratively reliable. What had previously functioned as the basic unit of both realist fiction and traditional historiography—something that happens, can be identified, and can be emplotted into causal sequence—becomes, in modernism, a radically unstable phenomenon (White 1996, pp. 22–23). White does not simply suggest that modernism represents events differently, but that it fundamentally destabilizes the ontological status of the event itself. Once the event is no longer secure as a unit of meaning, its negation—the non-event, the non-occurrence, the "nothing that happens"—becomes equally productive for understanding modernist form and is itself a meaningful narrative condition.

This destabilization is closely tied, in White's argument, to the breakdown of the conceptual opposition between fact and fiction. In realist historiography and nineteenth-century narrative, events are assumed to exist prior to their representation. They occur, and then they are narrated. Modernism reverses or complicates this logic: what counts as an event is no longer given in advance but produced through representational form. This is why White insists that modernist representation dissolves the trinity of event, character, and plot (see White 1996, pp. 23–24), and leads to a "de-fetishizing" of both the event and the possibility of its realistic narrative representation (White 1996, p. 32). Without stable events, there can be no stable plot; without plot, the distinction between occurrence and non-occurrence becomes a matter of narrative framing rather than empirical reality. The "event" becomes something like a perceptual or interpretive effect rather than a factual unit. As a consequence of this aesthetic-conceptual shift, what appears as an "event" may be fragmented, internalized, or dispersed across perception, while what appears as "non-event" may become structurally significant. In this sense, even "nothing happening" acquires narrative weight, since the absence of action can be just as formally organized and meaningful as action itself.

Fredric Jameson's discussion of Sartre's *Nausea* (1938) in his *Sartre: The Origins of a Style* (1961) addresses the nature of modernist events in a similar manner. On the one hand, there is the idea that "[o]nly in the moment of the act itself can something be said to happen really: this moment without past or future, a place of silence and of total freedom" (Jameson 1961, p. 12). On the other hand, this present is always already structured by what Sartre calls facticity: the weight of an already-formed past, which appears to pre-inscribe the possibilities of action (see Jameson 1961, pp. 13–14). This contradiction creates a paradox: events seem both absolutely contingent and already determined. If so, then what appears

as an “event” may in fact be the unfolding of something already structurally determined; if not, then the event collapses into pure contingency, and narrative coherence dissolves.

If an occurrence is simply an instance that takes place in empirical time, it can remain minimal and descriptive—an action, gesture, exchange, movement, or even a perceptual shift—without requiring narrative meaning. By contrast, an event is an occurrence that has been selected, framed, and charged with significance: it is an occurrence that has been transformed into narrative intelligibility, that is, given causal weight, placed into a sequence, and made to matter. In other words, an event is not just something that happens, but something that is recognized as happening in a way that reorganizes meaning, temporality, or consequence. Events require emplotment; occurrences do not. Within the modernist framework of events (and non-events) developed by Jameson (mapped onto his reading of Sartre’s works) and White, realist narratives convert occurrences into events almost automatically: actions are integrated into plot, causality is established, and the temporal sequence is stabilized. In Bowen’s modernist fiction, however, this conversion is interrupted. Her novels either prevent occurrences from becoming events or produce situations where it is unclear whether an occurrence can or will become an event. In *Friends and Relations*, Bowen herself names this suspended state as “the large non-occurrence” (Bowen [1931] 2020, p. 115), marking precisely the condition in which something is continually imminent but never allowed to consolidate into event, a term I will return to and elaborate as the novel’s own articulation of a sexuality structured by deferred event-formation.

Recent works, such as Doug Battersby’s account of Bowen’s modernism, read her fiction not simply as a turn inward, but as a reconfiguration of the very “tools” by which inwardness is rendered narratable (see Battersby 2024, 2026). Battersby shows that Bowen both “subscribes to a modernist understanding of the novel” and simultaneously develops an increasing “wariness about their monomaniacal application,” especially in relation to stream of consciousness as a privileged technique for capturing interior life (Battersby 2026, p. 74). What I want to emphasize here is that this ambivalence is not just a feature of Bowen’s aesthetic positioning but is crucial in how we think about the transition from occurrence to event in her fiction: what Battersby describes as Bowen’s gradual shift from radical interior monologue to a more “interventionist narrative voice” (Battersby 2026, p. 77) marks, for me, precisely a hesitation over whether interiority can reliably stabilize experience as event. In his broader account, stream of consciousness is not simply a formal innovation but a historically variable attempt to “translate experience” into narrative form, always exposed to its own limits in representing affective complexity.

Read alongside White and Jameson, Bowen’s growing skepticism toward the sufficiency of stream of consciousness becomes significant in the following way: if the modernist event is already unstable at a structural level, then I would argue that Bowen’s fluctuating deployment of interiority can be read as a sustained testing of whether occurrences of feeling ever fully consolidate into narratable events at all. What matters, in other words, is not only that Bowen moves between techniques of interiority and narration, but that this movement itself becomes a way of staging uncertainty about event formation. Battersby’s emphasis on Bowen’s growing wariness of pure interiority is particularly relevant here, since it implies that non-occurrence in Bowen is never simply pure absence, but is instead continually re-framed through a voice that seeks—without fully resolving it—to articulate what cannot be fully enacted and turned into an event.

In my reading of the modernist event in Bowen’s novels, therefore, non-occurrence is not the absence of an event. It is the absence of the passage from occurrence to event. In other words, something may be happening at the level of occurrence (interactions, perceptions, decisions hovering on the edge of action), but it never stabilizes into an event. The text

does not allow the occurrence to be transformed into an event, and the occurrence itself is reduced to a non-occurrence as it never fully becomes an event. Perhaps most importantly, the boundary between occurrence and non-occurrence becomes unstable, since what does not happen may be as structurally overdetermined as what does. Non-occurrence emerges as a condition in which the event is perpetually imminent but never actualized. It is not that “nothing happens,” but that happening is continuously displaced into a future that never fully arrives. The present becomes saturated with potentiality that is never realized, and in this sense, non-occurrence can be seen as an *unrealized futurity*.

In Bowen’s interwar fiction, this logic is particularly visible in the contrast between the emergence of a sexual event in *The House in Paris* and the maintenance of non-occurrence as unrealized futurity in *Friends and Relations*. In *The House in Paris*, occurrences are ultimately allowed to consolidate into at least one recognizable event—Karen’s and Max’s affair. The narrative permits the progression into a *realized* futurity—the existence of Leopold. In *Friends and Relations*, however, occurrences proliferate without consolidation: actions, desires, and interactions are present, but the narrative consistently withholds their transformation into an event—that of the impending affair between Janet and Edward. What remains is a sustained condition of “the large non-occurrence” (Bowen [1931] 2020, p. 115)—not emptiness, but the refusal of event-formation itself.

It is precisely here that Kahan’s theorization of celibacy allows me to sharpen what I mean by non-occurrence. Kahan insists that celibacy should not be understood as simply the absence or negation of sex, nor as a deficient or repressed form of it, but as a distinct “sexual formation” in its own right—one that has been consistently misrecognized because it does not conform to dominant models of sexual expression (Kahan 2013, pp. 1–6). What I find particularly productive in his account is the way celibacy destabilizes the binary between the sexual and the nonsexual: rather than standing outside sexuality, it reorganizes its terms. By refusing the assumption that all absence must conceal latent expression, Kahan opens up the possibility of taking non-actualization seriously on its own terms. Celibacy, in this sense, is not reducible to lack; it names a condition structured by suspension, in which multiple meanings—identity, choice, resistance, interval—coexist without resolving into a single stable form.

Read through this lens, I want to suggest that celibacy operates as a sexual analogue of Bowen’s “non-occurrence.” It describes a condition in which the “event” of sexual relation remains perpetually imminent yet unrealized. What matters here is not that nothing happens, but that the passage from possibility to event is continually deferred. In this way, celibacy helps clarify non-occurrence as a temporal and affective structure: a way of inhabiting time in which futurity is sustained but never fulfilled. Rather than marking lack or failure, it becomes a mode of ongoing deferral, one that aligns closely with the modernist suspension of eventhood I have been tracing.

Celibacy as non-occurrence also disrupts the teleological logic of the marriage plot, even in those cases where marriage is in fact reached. Rather than securing closure, marriage is repeatedly absorbed back into the logic of non-occurrence, as its capacity to function as narrative endpoint is structurally weakened by the persistence of unrealized or withheld relations that surround it—this is particularly evident in *Friends and Relations*. By contrast, in *The House in Paris*, the sexual occurrence between Karen and Max is not contained within a logic of suspension but instead produces irreversible consequence in the form of Leopold’s conception. However, this transition from occurrence to event does not restore narrative and marital teleology; rather, it intensifies it in catastrophic form, where event formation generates rupture, proliferation of relations, and structural instability rather than closure. The following section develops this argument by showing how Bowen’s novels stage precisely this tension between (non-)occurrence and event, and

how even the teleology of the marriage plot remains internally disrupted by the logics of (non-)occurrence.

3. Marriage and the Breakdown of Teleological Plot

Importantly, non-occurrence does not eliminate narrative movement, but rather, re-configures it. The narrative advances not by what happens, but by what is continually postponed. This logic produces a form of temporality in which the present is thickened by expectation but emptied of resolution. The “event” becomes a structural horizon that organizes experience precisely by not arriving. Seen in this way, non-occurrence is central to modernist critiques of teleological narrative forms, and Bowen uses it specifically in relation to the marriage plot.

Andrew Bennett’s reading of Bowen’s early novels situates the resistance of the love story within a broader modernist reconfiguration of narrative itself, particularly the breakdown of the inherited marriage plot of the Victorian and Edwardian novel. What emerges in post-war fiction, Bennett argues, is a “post-war resistance to the teleology of the marriage plot,” a refusal of narrative progression toward closure in marriage as the privileged endpoint of romantic development, as marriage and romantic love, and with that any notion of a greater “change,” are no longer viable options for Bowen’s early heroines (Bennett 2009, p. 29). Rachel Bryan complements this view by stressing the material and social afterlives of the war: there are simply “no more eligible men,” no longer a stable supply of romantic protagonists to occupy the structural role of the hero, which leaves figures such as John Milton in *The Hotel* displaced, forced into narrative positions for which they are structurally unsuited (Bryan 2024, p. 116). In this context, love stories no longer progress according to established narrative logic but instead become sites where progression is suspended, rerouted, or refused altogether.

Although *Friends and Relations* focuses on the married lives of the Studdart sisters, the consequences of the War continue to loom in the background. The novel begins with a wedding, yet the reader is immediately reminded that, in the post-war world, “[g]irls could not all expect to marry” (Bowen [1931] 2020, p. 11). This wedding, then, between Laurel Studdard and Edward Tilney is a happy exception. At the wedding party, we quickly learn that Laurel’s sister Janet is in love with Edward; and we also meet Lady Elfrida Tilney, Edward’s mother, “a divorcée” who had at one point “ruined herself” with a scandalous affair, a “débâcle” some twenty years ago, after which she left Edward’s father, but still failed to marry her new “correspondent,” Considine Meggatt (Bowen [1931] 2020, pp. 8, 58, 77). In the weeks following Laurel’s wedding, Janet becomes engaged to Rodney Meggatt, nephew to Considine and heir to his uncle’s large estate. Upset by this match, which threatens to make Considine a “relation,” Edward’s childish behavior (as he still suffers from his mother’s affair, experienced at “the most sensitive age”) leads to a temporary break in the engagement (Bowen [1931] 2020, p. 18). Ultimately, however, the disruption is contained: Rodney and Janet marry, bringing into relation the estranged lovers Lady Elfrida and Considine.

Even though both young heroines do in fact marry, marriage itself no longer produces transformation or narrative development. As Bennett notes, part of the reason “nothing much happens” in this novel of (non-)events is precisely that the marriages occur almost immediately, within the opening pages, short-circuiting the expectation that marriage will function as narrative culmination (Bennett 2009, pp. 34–35). Marriage happens, but it does not *eventuate*: it fails to generate change, remaining structurally inert within a world where narrative progression has already been suspended.

Elizabeth Freeman’s account of the “wedding form,” in *The Wedding Complex: Forms of Belonging in Modern American Culture* (2002), complicates what is at stake. Following the

claims of anthropologist Robert Brian, Freeman argues that Western culture lacks “public modes of expression for emotional ties that fall outside of structured kin groups,” and that the wedding therefore becomes a compensatory site for staging alternative affiliations that exceed both couplehood and formal kinship. Weddings, she suggests, can be mobilized to imagine “something different from the social choices at hand,” including “isolated individuality,” “domesticated long-term couplehood,” or abstract collectivities such as “the gay community or official nation.” Crucially, what feels “queerest” in these ceremonial reconfigurations is not their alignment with marriage as institution, but the unpredictability of “small-scale alliances” and the desire to make them publicly legible (Freeman 2002, pp. ix–x). Read through Freeman, Bowen’s early marriage plots begin to look less like narratives oriented toward marital closure than like scenes in which social relations are temporarily re-aestheticized—displayed, rearranged, but not stabilized. Marriage in *Friends and Relations* does not resolve relational tension; instead, it multiplies it into a network of adjacent, unstable affiliations. What appears as narrative resolution is in fact the formalization of already unstable “small-scale alliances,” which the novel immediately begins to disorganize again.

This pattern exceeds the novel’s opening pages and continues to shape its later domestic and social relations. Ten years after the wedding, the narrative shifts to the Meggatts’ rural estate, where the reader encounters the new and enlarged family. Janet and Rodney now have a daughter, Hermione, and Edward and Laurel have two children, Simon and Anna, who are visiting the estate while their parents remain in London. A crisis ensues that propels the plot when Janet invites Lady Elfrida to visit at a time when her former lover, Considine, is also present. Significantly, there is another unexpected visitor at the house: Theodora, a young woman whose queer presence makes matters even more complicated. In love with Janet, Theodora informs Laurel and Edward of the situation at the estate, effectively prompting Edward’s arrival in search of his children.² Enraged, Edward hurries to take them away, presumably concerned about the corrupting moral influence to which they are exposed. However, when he arrives at the house, Edward instead meets Janet and, during a short conversation with her, is surprised to find himself finally admitting his long-standing love for her. Rather than propelling the narrative toward the consolidation of occurrence into event (in this case, an extramarital affair), this admission of love underscores Bowen’s wider refusal of narrative consolidation, leaving event formation unresolved and structurally deferred.

This deferred event formation reaches its most condensed expression in a final exchange between Janet and Lady Elfrida, where Janet confesses that she married Rodney in order to be “related” to Edward. At the height of this scene, Janet perceives the emergence of a “fatal apple-tree in a stained-glass window” which, “in its shadow,” contains “at each side, the man and the woman, Considine and Elfrida.” This tree, growing up from “an old branching sin,” changes into another, the tree of Jesse. As the tree of carnal knowledge and sin turns into the tree of genealogy, Janet becomes aware that even one “vital incision” would scatter the branches, leaving them with “no more part in each other at all: strangers” (Bowen [1931] 2020, p. 79). Janet clearly sees the consequences of her impending affair: rooted in “sin” (which, at the same time, is undeniably the foundation of this family), it would bring the entirety of the network of relations down, making them all strangers to one another, like branches fallen from a tree. The very conditions that sustain this network of relations are also the ones that perpetually threaten to undo the relational economy of affiliation that structures the novel’s social world.

In line with this logic, the narrative moves away from the possibility of resolution and re-enters a mode in which event formation will not be allowed. Janet travels to London where, under the pretext of visiting her sister (as she tells both herself and others), she

ends up meeting Edward. They have lunch, and later meet in her hotel, accompanied at first by a third person—Edward’s close friend Lewis. When Lewis leaves, Edward comes back, but at this point Janet has already decided that “[t]here is nowhere for [them] to be” (Bowen [1931] 2020, p. 79). As Janet takes a night train back home to Rodney, Edward realizes that “[h]is will was not hers, nor his hers; their will, like a frozen waterfall, seemed to be timelessly standing still” (Bowen [1931] 2020, p. 102). The novel’s last crisis is caused by Edward, who does not return home that evening but instead sleeps at his mother’s house, while Laurel and Lewis look for him. As his telephone call reassures everybody that he is going to be home soon, Janet is already back home, sleeping, as the thought of the affair has also been put to rest. The novel’s final rejection of the unrealized affair thus reinforces the pattern that structures *Friends and Relations*: a refusal of event formation that keeps even apparently decisive moments suspended at the level of non-occurrence.

The ending of *Friends and Relations* further radicalizes this logic of narrative suspension, as the two sisters are symbolically returned to a celibate pre-marital state, as though the entire plot had never properly taken place (Bennett 2009, p. 36). For Bennett, this “non-happening” of the plot, and the sisters’ near reversion to a pre-narrative condition, reveals Bowen’s engagement with—and critique of—the conventional, pre-modernist marriage narrative (ibid.). However, this reading remains bound to the idea that marriage fails as narrative resolution. What my analysis insists on, by contrast, is that marriage does not simply fail to conclude the plot or produce absence of closure; it actively reorganizes narrative form. Read alongside Freeman, what emerges more precisely is not the absence of marriage’s effects, but its displacement from endpoint to structure. Marriage does not conclude the plot; it organizes its very capacity for repetition, recombination, and deferral. In this sense, celibacy is not external to this system but structurally immanent to it: marking the non-occurrence of the possible affair, it functions as one mode through which marriage is displaced as an endpoint while remaining structurally operative within the narrative. Therefore, in the novel, marriage functions as a non-teleological structure rather than a teleological endpoint, and this dynamic is enabled precisely through the existence of the celibacy plot.

If *Friends and Relations* sustains the logic of celibate non-occurrence, *The House in Paris* allows the sexual occurrence to go forward, which in turn leads to catastrophic events. Where *Friends and Relations* opens by establishing a network of social and affective relations, *The House in Paris* begins by exposing the structural fragility of such relations, introducing two unrelated children into a space defined by contingent and provisional attachments. Henrietta arrives from London, pausing in Paris while en route to her grandmother in the south of France; Leopold travels from Italy, where he lives with his American adoptive parents, the Grant Moodys, to Paris, where he is to meet his birth mother, Karen Forrester, in the house of her former landlady, Mme Fisher. The house, then, belongs to the Fishers: Mme Fisher, who used to run a kind of boarding house for “well-bred, well-fed, well-read, English-speaking girls” (Bowen [1935] 2002, p. 108), where Karen once lived as a student, and her daughter, Miss Naomi Fisher. At the present moment, Mme Fisher is mortally ill and confined to her bedroom, while Naomi acts as her caretaker. Rather than functioning as stable points within a coherent relational system, both children are positioned within trajectories of transit, displacement, and deferred connection, so that even kinship appears here as something routed through interruption rather than continuity.

This logic of displaced and provisional attachment is immediately staged at the level of narrative expectation and its refusal. As Leopold anxiously waits for the arrival of his mother—who alone can answer the questions that have long troubled him, “Why am I? What made me be?” (Bowen [1935] 2002, p. 65)—a telegram arrives instead, informing Miss Fisher that Karen cannot come. At this point, the narrative shifts into a flashback

that reconstructs Leopold's origins. Set ten years earlier, this section stages not simply a retrospective account of events, but the conditions under which sexual occurrence becomes narratively legible as event. Karen Michaelis, who comes from a respectable middle-class English family, has agreed to marry Ray Forrestier. While Ray is away in the East on a delicate mission (Bowen [1935] 2002, p. 68), Karen travels to Ireland to visit her Aunt Violet and Uncle Bill, partly to escape the pressures of her engagement. Although she is initially content, she becomes increasingly anxious following a miscommunication with Ray and upon learning that her aunt is dying. Upon Karen's return to London, she meets Naomi Fisher and her fiancée, Max Ebhart, a "French-English-Jewish man" (Bowen [1935] 2002, p. 91). It is at this point that the narrative allows a sexual occurrence to cross the threshold into event: Karen and Max start an affair, which becomes narratively legible as a determining rupture, consolidating prior occurrences into causal consequence in the conception of Leopold. In White's sense, what had remained dispersed across the level of occurrence is retrospectively emplotted as an event that reorganizes the entire narrative field.

This moment of event formation is immediately complicated by a wider set of entangled relations that exceed the boundaries of the affair itself. While pregnant Karen tells her family of the affair, Max returns to the house in Paris to break off his engagement with Naomi, only to realize that her mother is eavesdropping on their conversation. Although this is never made explicit, it is clear that Max was sexually involved with Naomi's mother, and furthermore, it is also obvious to both Naomi and Max that their own relationship has been orchestrated by Mme Fisher. Facing Mme Fisher confirms Max's fears, as he realizes what she has done—presumably managing both his relationships with Naomi and Karen, driving him from one to the other. Realizing that he "could never free himself from her emasculating power," and in one of the "most melodramatic scenes in Bowen's novels" (Ellmann 2003, p. 119), he slits his wrists—in the same waiting room where Leopold is hoping to meet Karen—and staggers off to the front door of the house, where he dies.

The flashback sequence ends with Naomi delivering the news to Karen and arranging for her child's adoption as, after all, Ray Forrestier marries Karen. Here, marriage appears to restore order, but only at the level of narrative containment rather than transformation. As in *Friends and Relations*, Ray's marriage to Karen does not terminate the sexual and affective network that has already been generated. Marriage here is not an endpoint but a catalyst of infrastructural reorganization: it reroutes the consequences of the sexual event into adoptive, genealogical, and bureaucratic forms that continue to circulate without narrative resolution. In this sense, Bowen's marriage plot anticipates what Freeman identifies as the wedding's capacity to generate "small-scale alliances" that are made public yet remain structurally unpredictable.

In the present, as Karen is unable to face the child she left behind, Ray arrives at the house in Paris in her place, to collect Leopold, and take him home. Although denied the story of his birth by his mother, Leopold learns the truth about his origins from Mme Fisher—the grand manipulator who through her actions is, ultimately, "responsible" for his birth. On the novel's final page, Ray and Leopold have taken Henrietta to catch her train, and they are waiting for a taxi in front of the station, that will presumably take them home. *The House in Paris* ultimately reveals, then, that even where sexual occurrence does take place—where desire produces consequence, rupture, and a child—marriage does not function as the telos of narrative development. Instead, it operates as a non-teleological structure that absorbs disruption without resolving it, transforming catastrophe into arrangement and continuation rather than closure. If in *Friends and Relations* marriage's teleological function is subverted through celibate non-occurrence, then in *The House in Paris* it is disrupted through the eruption of sexual occurrence into catastrophic event.

4. Stillness and Motion: Forms of (No-)Presence

Building on the argument that marriage in Bowen does not function as a teleological endpoint but as a structuring principle of relation, in this section I turn from marriage as institution to the characters through which the tension between occurrence and non-occurrence is articulated across the two novels. I move from *Friends and Relations* to *The House in Paris* in order to trace the different narrative modes represented by Janet and Karen: Janet is composed through suspension and non-occurrence, whereas Karen is constituted through the production of event and consequence.

Janet, a “positive no-presence” (Bowen [1931] 2020, p. 25) and the stillest of Bowen’s arrested characters (Ellmann 2003, p. 88), has neither the will nor the power to go through with the affair. It is precisely this no-presence that enables the sexual occurrence to emerge only at the threshold of the event, without ever fully consolidating into it, thereby producing what I have been calling, following Bowen’s formulation, a “non-occurrence.” Continuing a pattern established in characters such as Lois (from *The Last September*) and Sydney (*The Hotel*), Janet remains “paralyzed by the impasse of innocence” (Ellmann 2003, p. 98). This stillness has even led to *Friends and Relations* being described as Bowen’s “weakest novel,” marked by “lifelessness,” “exhibiting good structure without compelling feeling” (Ellmann 2003, p. 88). Yet, Janet’s lack of feeling can also be read as playing a disruptive role.

According to Tiffany D. Ball, Janet’s affect should not be understood simply as absence or failure. Rather, her muted, “inexpressive” affect draws attention to what, following Arlie Hochschild, she calls “feeling rules”—the socially prescribed norms that govern how one ought to feel and display emotion (as quoted in Ball 2025, p. 367). Janet’s repeated failure to perform the expected emotions of fiancée, wife, or mother exposes these norms as learned, effortful, and sustained through what Hochschild terms “emotional labor” (Ball 2025, pp. 368–69). In this sense, her apparent blankness can be read as a subtle refusal: she does not “rise to the occasion,”³ and in doing so she denaturalizes the affective expectations that uphold heteronormative femininity (Ball 2025, pp. 369–70). What emerges is not an escape from normativity but a broader unsettling of it: Bowen’s novel exposes heteronormative (and I would add, queer)⁴ forms of attachment as sustained through labor. The “non-occurrence” of the affair, then, is less a void than a quiet transgression—a refusal to participate in the emotional work that would make either form of relation fully legible. It is also the sustained management of a possible sexual occurrence that is never allowed to pass into event, a form of narrative and affective withholding that produces celibacy not as lack, but as a structured mode of relation.

Janet is, then, less the agent of narrative than its point of suspension. Although she stands at the center of the plot, the idea of the affair is repeatedly introduced and structured by others—most notably Lady Elfrida and Theodora—rather than initiated by her. Hermione Lee notes that Bowen’s early heroines are often “unable to make their feelings come to anything or assert themselves,” and she concludes that Bowen’s later novels are more complex precisely because they allow for the possibility of more decisive action (Lee 1999, pp. 65–66). Within this framework, Theodora emerges as an exception: her obsessive attachment to Janet produces a disruptive intensity, her lesbian desire appearing “partly ludicrous and oppressive, partly as an energetic, furious resistance to convention” (Lee 1999, p. 65). In this sense, Theodora functions much like Karen in *The House in Paris*: a figure whose affect generates movement and temporarily resists narrative stasis. Yet even this intensity is absorbed back into the logic of blocked development. Through figures such as Theodora—whose affective intensity seems to promise transformation—the narrative approaches the threshold of event, but ultimately still fails to materialize.

These dynamics can also be read through Ellmann’s account of Bowen’s triadic structures. Heterosexual relations in her work are never dyadic but are always mediated by

a third figure who simultaneously enables and destabilizes desire (Ellmann 2003, p. 8). These third terms take multiple forms across Bowen's fiction: the seductive older woman (Mrs Kerr in *The Hotel*, Mme Fisher in *The House in Paris*), the controlling maternal figure (Lady Naylor in *The Last September*, Lady Waters in *To the North*), or the child (Portia in *The Death of the Heart*, Leopold in *The House in Paris*). In *Friends and Relations*, this logic intensifies: the novel "stretches the four-cornered love affair into a hexagon," with relations "dividing into fourths, fifths, and sixths" (Ellmann 2003, pp. 71, 73). Laurel–Edward–Janet; Janet–Edward–Theodora; Janet–Edward–Theodora–Lady Elfrida; Janet–Edward–Lewis: desire circulates through permutations that never settle into stable dyads. As outlined in the Introduction, the triadic structure does not provide stable resolution but displacement, as desire circulates across configurations that prevent its consolidation into a couple. Kahan's concept of the celibacy plot offers a broader narratological framework for this dynamic, drawing explicitly on Girard's model of triangular desire to rethink the triangle not as a structure of repression but as one of production. In Kahan's formulation, the third term is constitutive rather than auxiliary, and narrative form is organized through mediated desire rather than dyadic fulfilment (Kahan 2013, p. 28). Read through this lens, Ellmann's triads are not simply descriptive of Bowen's relational structures but instead show how mediation by the third produces both attachment and deferral.

In *Friends and Relations*, Janet's marriage to Rodney exists in order to make her "related" to Edward, a logic facilitated by Lady Elfrida and Considine. Yet the third also becomes visible through its disappearance: once removed, the couple collapses into non-occurrence, as Ellmann notes, "the couple, released from the interference of a shadowy third . . . cannot sustain itself" (Ellmann 2003, p. 90). Even the unrealized affair between Janet and Edward depends on the imaginative projection of a third. In a key scene reminiscent of Karen's travels across the Channel in *The House in Paris*, Lewis envisions their affair, seeing in his mind's eye "a ship draw out—you are aboard a moment [. . .] you see the shore recessive, withdrawing yourself from you; the familiar town; the docks with yourself standing; figures [. . .] all gone" (Bowen [1931] 2020, p. 112). Yet this "violence of departure, this outgoing from the self" (Bowen [1931] 2020, p. 110) in *Friends and Relations* is never actually experienced; it remains confined to Lewis's imagination. He wonders whether "those two [are] by now out at sea, past the buoys, on an ocean of unhappy knowledge," anticipating instead a "catastrophic torrent" that would crack through houses, ruining their foundations (Bowen [1931] 2020, pp. 109, 112). And yet, nothing happens. Their love, as he reflects, "was homeless" (Bowen [1931] 2020, p. 110), unable to take form within the structures available to it, repeating Janet's words to Edward: there is no place for us. In the end, it is left to figures like Theodora—and to Lewis himself, as a kind of "shadowy third"—to sustain this imagined drama, which unfolds only in their minds as the "still direful theatre of this large non-occurrence [. . .] the ship had not sailed, the aloe had not flowered" (Bowen [1931] 2020, p. 115).

It is at this point that a contrast with Karen in *The House in Paris* becomes structurally legible. If Janet produces celibate non-occurrence through affective suspension, Karen produces occurrence through affective excess. Unlike the paralyzed and perpetually still Janet, Karen (following Emmeline in *To the North*) surrenders to the "transport" of passion (Ellmann 2003, p. 99). The role of transport in Bowen's fiction is to mark those moments when affect exceeds control—when feeling breaks through the managed surfaces of social life and produces movement, rupture, or consequence. Bowen's forms of transport are a negation of free will in her works (Ellmann 2003, p. 98). It is precisely this relinquishment of free will and control that Janet resists and Karen seeks, longing as she says, for a revolution she should like it to happen in spite of her and that should "come soon; I should like to start fresh while I am still young, with everything that I had to depend on gone [. . .] I feel

it's time something happened" (Bowen [1935] 2002, p. 87). As Karen's affair with a foreign man is at least partially a rebellious act towards her family, Ray being "a cousin's cousin," so that her marriage designed and approved by her parents "would have that tough of inbreeding that makes marriage so promising" (Bowen [1935] 2002, p. 69), Janet's affair with her brother-in-law is almost incestuous, as it would both continue and shutter the relations she has worked hard to establish.

This difference also reorganizes narrative temporality. In *Friends and Relations*, action is perpetually deferred; in *The House in Paris*, action consolidates into event. Karen's affair with Max does not remain suspended but produces its material consequence: Leopold. The affair thus becomes narratively legible, even if catastrophic. Yet this emergence of event is inseparable from the destructive logic of mediation: Max's entanglement with Naomi's mother, and Mme Fisher's orchestration of relationships, reveal that even "occurrence" is structurally overdetermined. Max's eventual suicide, staged in the same space where Leopold awaits his mother, marks the violent collapse of triadic mediation into irreversible consequence.

The House in Paris, therefore, moves toward a different form of closure than *Friends and Relations*: not a return to the beginning of its plot, but consequence. Leopold's adoption, Ray Forrestier's substitution as paternal figure, and the final image of transport home all suggest that something has irreversibly happened. Ray becomes the third who stabilizes the Karen-Ray-Max configuration, while Leopold inherits the position of displaced third within the structure. Ray feels his absence, as the "third chair left pushed in at a table set for a couple" and as "the third bed in their room" (Bowen [1935] 2002, pp. 246–47). It is Leopold's presence that is needed to make complete the heterosexual couple, to take the place of his dead father.

But once the triad has been broken and the couple set apart by the destructive powers of sex, the structure cannot be re-established; going back to the past is not possible, as the affair has decisively divided time into a celibate past and a sexual present. If *Friends and Relations* ends in domestic and celibate bliss—with the Studdard daughters visiting their parents and their old childhood home (a sexless place for both women), the false crisis averted, relations still standing—*The House in Paris* leaves the readers and the characters to deal with a never-ending crisis, forever waiting for an exit from a shuttered world, as Leopold and Ray are waiting for a taxi in front of the station, that will, or should take them home—the reader is not allowed to know. Bowen's following novel, and the last one published in the interwar years, *The Death of the Heart*, deals with the reintegration of the abandoned child into the "normal" family after the disruption caused by sexual acts, but leaves this ordeal to the following generation.

The contrast is therefore not simply between two novels, but between two regimes of narrative ontology: Janet's world of (celibate) non-presence, in which action is withheld, and the event never arrives; and Karen's world of (sexual) presence, in which affect produces irreversible narrative consequence. In *Friends and Relations*, the couple is constantly deferred; in *The House in Paris*, the couple is shattered by the production of an event that cannot be undone. Janet embodies the refusal of event formation; Karen embodies its excess. In both cases, the third remains structurally decisive. Whether as imaginative projection (Lewis), erotic mediator (Theodora), or maternal orchestrator (Mme Fisher and Lady Elfrida), the third ensures that neither non-occurrence nor occurrence is purely self-generated.

5. Conclusions

Friends and Relations and *The House in Paris* can be read together as two articulations of the same narrative logic: the organization of sexual relation through its suspension

or its consequence. In the first, sexual possibility circulates without ever consolidating into action; in the second, sexual relation is permitted to occur, but only at the cost of producing irreversible disruption. Taken together, the novels do not simply oppose celibacy to sexuality, or absence to presence, but stage two different modalities of sexual presence within narrative form itself: one structured by stillness, the other by motion.

In this article I have used Kahan's account of celibacy as a sexual formation rather than a lack or negation as my starting point in analyzing two modes in which sexuality functions in these two novels: as a celibate non-occurrence and a catastrophic sexual event. For Kahan, celibacy is not the absence of sexuality but a mode in which sexual meaning is reorganized through suspension, refusal, and non-actualization, resisting the assumption that desire must culminate in act or identity. Read through this lens, I see *Friends and Relations* not as a failure of sexual development but as a structured field of non-occurrence in which the "event" of sexuality is perpetually imminent yet withheld. In *Friends and Relations*, stillness is therefore not inertness but a mode of structure. The withholding of sexual occurrence—in the deferred affair between Janet and Edward—does not halt narrative movement but redirects it into repetition, mediation, and displacement. Desire is staged and refracted through multiple figures, but it never stabilizes into event. I read celibacy here as a way of organizing social and affective life without allowing it to resolve into sexual or marital teleology.

Freeman's account of the "wedding form" helps me further specify the broader stakes of this structure. For Freeman, marriage and its ceremonial logic do not simply consolidate heteronormative closure but can also stage unstable "small-scale alliances" that momentarily reconfigure kinship, affect, and social belonging. In *Friends and Relations*, I see the marriage plot precisely in this double register: as institutional closure that nevertheless produces further relational instability. Marriage does not resolve the narrative but multiplies its relations, binding characters into configurations that remain open, reversible, and prone to reactivation. Celibate non-occurrence, in this sense, is not outside the social order but produced within its most formal structures of relation.

By contrast, I argue that *The House in Paris* reorganizes this economy of deferral through the production of sexual event. Karen's affair with Max shifts desire from suspended possibility into material consequence, generating Leopold as an irreversible result. What had been structured as anticipation in *Friends and Relations* becomes, here, a catastrophic event: once sexual relation occurs, it cannot be contained. Yet even this movement into event does not escape mediation. As Freeman's emphasis on the wedding as a site of unpredictable relational reconfiguration suggests, I see the consequences of sexual occurrence as immediately redistributed into new kinship arrangements—marriage, adoption, and substituted parenthood—rather than resolved.

Therefore, *Friends and Relations* and *The House in Paris* do not oppose celibacy and sexuality as two distinct states, but stage two regimes of sexual presence. Through Kahan, I understand celibacy as a structured suspension of sexual teleology; through Freeman, I read marriage and kinship not as endpoints but as mechanisms for reorganizing relational instability. These two novels thus articulate stillness and motion not as opposites, but as two formal ways in which sexual (no-)presence is made narratively legible: either as the sustained deferral of event, or as its irreversible and catastrophic production.

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Notes

- ¹ For fuller accounts of innocence as structural suspension and the failure of experiential consolidation in Bowen's early novels (see [Ellmann 2003](#); [Hoogland 1996](#); [Cullingford 2007](#)).
- ² Theodora's role as a queer catalyst of narrative progression warrants further discussion, but this falls outside the scope of the present article; her significance will instead be addressed through the lens of the "third" below.
- ³ Here it is worth mentioning Bowen's own essay "On Not Rising to the Occasion" first published in *Vogue* in February 1957 and later included in the volume *Listening In: Broadcasts, Speeches, and Interviews by Elizabeth Bowen*, edited with an Introduction by Allan Hepburn ([Bowen \[1957\] 2010](#)). In this essay, the "occasion" names an unspoken yet exacting demand placed by adults upon children to display appropriate, legible affect under scrutiny. Not rising to it appears less as simple failure than as the strain of navigating expectations that are diffuse, pervasive, and nearly impossible to satisfy without excess or deficiency—a dynamic that resonates with Janet's own muted, withholding responses ([Bowen \[1957\] 2010](#), pp. 107–11).
- ⁴ Particularly significant in Janet's refusal of Theodora's advances, which cannot be reduced to her failure to perform the heteronormative roles of wife and mother.

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