

Eddie and Eden: Eddie and Biblical Temptation in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*

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Abstract: In Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*, Bowen splits her novel into three sections: "The World," "The Flesh," and "The Devil." Bowen's title points to Thomas Aquinas' identification of the world, flesh, and devil as biblical temptations. Biblical parables reveal how each category of temptation draws humanity from their faith in God. Bowen's protagonist is Portia, a 17-year-old orphan who is sent to live with her indifferent half-brother and his judgmental wife. Portia moves into unfamiliar British high society, and thirsts for connection, leading to the Eddie, the "temptation" in Bowen's novel. This paper outlines an analogous reading of the novel, in which Eddie embodies each type of Biblical temptation and instead of Christian faith, characters worship British society. This paper will demonstrate how Eddie embodies each of the Bible's definitions of "The World," "The Flesh," and "the Devil" temptations and draws Portia away from her new family and, subsequently, British propriety, which represents religious faith in Bowen's analogy; Bowen's analogy between religion and society, and the implications that wavering from society is sinful, allows readers to ponder the social expectations of their own societies, and for Western readers, suggests societal expectation has replaced religion entirely.

In Elizabeth Bowen's *The Death of the Heart*, Bowen splits her novel into three sections: "The World," "The Flesh," and "The Devil." Bowen's titles point to Biblical temptations from Christian doctrine. Thomas Aquinas identifies Biblical temptations as world, flesh, and devil in *Summa Theologica*, but their definitions are more evident in Biblical parables,

warning humanity about the existence of these temptations and their power to draw them away from their faith in God. Bowen's protagonist is Portia, a 17-year-old orphan who has lived most of her life as a Bohemian, bouncing constantly between different nations where she lived in hotels. Because of her lifestyle, Portia could not form deep, personal connections. When she moves in with her half-brother, Thomas, and his wife, Anna, Portia enters British society and experiences new temptations, namely, a love interest named Eddie. Even if Bowen did not intend to praise or critique British society, focusing on her section titles—"The World," "The Flesh," and "The Devil"—associates British society with the Christian church. Worldly temptations are human distractions that distract from faith; flesh temptations involve vanity and carnal sexuality that oppose Christian ideals of reproductive sex; the devil is a temptation that ruins faith entirely. However, the characters in the novel do not worship the Christian God. They are loyal to British propriety. This paper will demonstrate how Eddie embodies each of the Bible's definitions of "The World," "The Flesh," and "the Devil" temptations and draws Portia away from her new family and, subsequently, British propriety, which represents religious faith in Bowen's analogy; Bowen's analogy between religion and society, and the implications that wavering from society is sinful, allows readers to ponder the social expectations of their own societies, and for Western readers, suggests societal expectation has replaced religion entirely.

Thomas Aquinas calls *The World*, *The Flesh*, and *The Devil* "great adversaries of our souls" (2010) and cites them as the source of all temptation, though he does not define the terms. Readers must turn to parables in the gospels to define these temptations; in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus provides an analogy of three kinds of unproductive soil. Thorny soil represents the world; the thorns represent "worldly" concerns that distract from religious practice. In a modern sense, these worldly concerns could be relationships, finances, or employment. The second soil produces a sprout but it withers. The parable im-

plies that carnal beliefs of The Flesh cause faith to flounder, such as sexual desire and vanity. In Christian doctrine, any sex that strays from marriage and reproduction is improper. When joined with concerns over personal sex appeal, a person strays from God's purpose of love and sex—to honour God through reproduction. The final seed attempts to grow on pounded soil, and birds eat the seed before it can begin to grow. The birds represent the "devil" temptation, sabotaging the seed before it can establish its faith (Matthew 13). To pull another example from the Bible, a snake tempts Eve to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge against God's orders, causing God to expel her and Adam from his Garden and squandering her relationship with God before it begins (Genesis 3). By causing Portia to focus on a crush and her own sex appeal, Eddie prevents her from establishing herself in British society, consequently embodying all three types of temptation in terms of Bowen's Biblical analogy.

The effect of Eddie as the "world" temptation on Portia becomes evident during her time at finishing school, where Miss Paullie illustrates the parallel setting between British Society and the Christian church. Miss Paullie describes the young girls working in her finishing schools as sitting in "bishops chairs" (Bowen 68). The young women are training to fulfil a woman's role in British society—to present themselves according to decorum, and provide exciting conversations on various popular European topics. Paullie recognizes that "*Sins* cut boldly up through every class in society, but mere misdemeanours show a certain level in life" (68), indicating that acting out of turn was equal to sinning against God. "Misdemeanours" damage one's position in society, just as a sin damages one's relationship with God. Portia commits one of these sins by focusing on something other than propriety, or devotion in terms of Bowen's "the world" analogy, by becoming distracted by an innocent crush. Portia pulls out a letter that Eddie had written to her in class, to which Miss Paullie reacts: "Surely that is not a letter? This is not the place or time to read your letters, is it? I think you must notice that the other girls don't do that" (66-67). By drawing Portia away from her studies—stud-

ies that are training her to become a proper British woman—Eddie becomes a worldly temptation. From this point in the section, Portia is rarely on the page without mention of Eddie, indicating he is beginning to absorb her thoughts. By calling the first section "The World," Bowen solidifies that Eddie and Portia's relationship is nothing more than a crush, as it will not lead to a marriage deemed proper in society, just as money distracts from faith in God. Contemporary readers can consider what it is society expects their focus to land on—money, power, family—and how distractions are socially punished.

Anna solidifies that Eddie embodies "The World" temptation by reflecting on how his demeanour clashes with the rest of her society. Eddie works for Thomas and has caused many at his company to dislike him because "he has shown himself, not for the first time, as one of those natures in which underground passion is, at a crisis, stronger than policy" (77). Eddie champions passion instead of propriety, the religion of Anna's society. His personality paints him as a temptation and a threat to Anna's way of life. "The world" temptation is illustrated by thorns that prevent one from devotion, and Eddie and his values prevent and contrast propriety. Anna is stronger than young Portia because she does not allow Eddie's passions to distract her from proper conduct. As the letter intercepted by Miss Paullie proves, Eddie is already tempting Portia away from a proper life and encouraging her to follow in his flawed footsteps, away from British propriety. If British propriety was exchanged for the Christian church, Eddie's distracted passions ensured he could not focus entirely on his faith; those who are drawn to him are destined for the same fate. Many readers will have been told to steer clear of others because they are a threat to their version of societal expectations; they are beacons of "sin" who infect those they draw in.

Allan Austin claims that Eddie is attracted to Portia because she represents "a new lease on the impossible life; with her, he seeks to sustain the innocence of adolescent love, the state which holds out to him the possibility of beautiful fulfilment so long as it is never tested" (6). Eddie is

addicted to adolescent fulfilment, and because he is willing to flex his charm to achieve this, he becomes a dangerous temptation, especially for a girl like Portia, who does not yet understand what romantic partnerships look like in proper British society. In this society, love is pragmatic; love is a vehicle towards marriage and joining society. An example of this kind of love is the rather passionless relationship between Thomas and Anna. Thomas admits "already, when he met Anna, he had been thinking of marriage; his means would by now allow it" (Bowen 45), and he notes "her smiling," "her good head," and "her good nature" (45). The decision to marry is practical: Thomas is in the financial position to get married, and Anna has agreeable qualities required in a wife. Eddie represents the opposite of this kind of relationship, seeking out many women to give him temporary happiness without promising a future to any, such as his holding hands with Daphne or his flirtations with Anna. Eddie embodies the world's temptation because he is concerned with enjoyment and ignores propriety, just as life's problems distract from religious faith. Portia's innocence will allow him to have fun without being pressured to marry. Eddie is already lost to British society, but by using Portia as his vehicle to escape propriety, he brings her with him and objectifies her in the process. A vehicle for diverging from impropriety can manifest in different forms for every reader, but the text allows readers to evaluate what the vehicle is taking them *from*. For Portia, it is a proper, British marriage.

In a Biblical sense, the flesh represents shallow and carnal sexual beliefs that reject Christian ideals of marriage and reproduction. By titling her second section "The Flesh," Bowen suggests that Portia is not working toward improvements that will benefit her, but instead, improvements that will attract a carnally-motivated Eddie. The "flesh" temptation is evident when Portia begins to think about sex appeal, which happens when she feels Eddie's eyes begin to wander. As Anna and Thomas demonstrate, sex appeal is not initially a factor in proper romantic partners. However, Portia is jealous of Daphne's seductiveness then she arrives at the sea-

side. Daphne is throwing a party and asks Portia if she dances, to which she meekly replies that she has, but only with other girls while living in hotels. Daphne scoffs, "men will not bite you" (188), making Portia jealous of Daphne's experience. While gazing at Daphne, Portia reflects, "her person was sexy, her conversation irreproachably chaste" (188). She would downplay any remark by saying, "you are awful," or by "simply using her eyes" (188). When comparing herself to Daphne, Portia "felt deflated" (188). Instead of considering how she should present herself in this new environment, she considers whether she is appealing enough to Eddie. In Anna and Thomas's society, sex is less important than how one conducts oneself. Anna and Thomas are concerned with their appearance to the rest of society, not how the pair feel about each other. Daphne is the antithesis of Anna and other society women, yet Portia is jealous of her, proving she is falling for Eddie's "flesh" temptation. Portia becomes jealous and focuses on sexuality, contrasting both British propriety and Christian marriage ideals.

Portia is further distracted when Eddie reveals his fleeting passions, forcing Portia to draw Eddie back to her, and thus further departing from proper conduct. When Eddie visits the seaside, he, Portia, and the rest of their seaside friends see a movie. Portia looks over in the darkness and realizes, "Eddie and Daphne were, with emphasis, holding hands. Eddie's fingers kept up a kneading movement; her thumb alertly twitching at the joint" (254). When Portia tells Eddie that this embarrassed her, Eddie pulls her deeper into temptation, telling her he was wrong about her if she cared about him holding hands with Daphne. Instead of realizing that Eddie is wrong for her life in society, she says, "I would rather be dead than a disappointment to you, *Please* [. . .] You are my whole reason to be alive" (261). Portia focuses on whether or not Eddie loves her, a flesh temptation drawing her away. If she focused on how she is conducting herself, Portia would not be begging for Eddie's affection, yet she is.

Portia longs for Eddie, but her blatant desire conflicts with how Anna, Thomas, and the rest of British soci-

ety conduct themselves. Alfred McDowell says, "the reason Windsor Terrace is confusing to Portia is that Thomas and Anna keep their real feelings carefully hidden" (McDowell 8). Even though this system is confusing to Portia, keeping qualms and passions private is what has allowed Windsor Terrace to remain; Anna is not expressing her longing for a lost love, nor is Thomas expressing his frustrations to her; both Anna and Thomas reject carnal temptation in favour of propriety. Eddie causes Portia to be over emotional, contrasting the level-headedness British society requires. Portia becomes self-deprecating and cannot remain calm regarding her relationship with Eddie. The contrast between Thomas, Anna, and Portia reveals the error in Portia's conduct. Anna and Thomas are the biblical model, and Portia cannot obtain this model with Eddie, and yet she lusts after him.

Just as the devil draws Eve away from her relationship with God before it can begin, Eddie ruins Portia's reputation in London before she can come of age. Portia meets St. Quinton while walking through the park, where he reveals that Anna has been reading Portia's diary and, worse, that Eddie told Anna about the diary's location. Although Eddie's actions betray Portia's trust, what is worse is how this has affected her reputation. Portia's diary reveals her—often unsavoury—perspective of all the people in London she interacts with. St. Quinton's opinion of Portia is that she is "working on us, making us into something. Which is not fair—we are not on our guard with you. For instance, now I know you keep this book, I shall always feel involved in some sort of plan" (Bowen 328). Like the bird that snatches the seed from the soil before it grows, Eddie has taken advantage of Portia's innocence, betrayed her trust, and has tarnished her reputation in British society before she can reach any advantage.

Eddie actively damages Portia's relationships before she can utilize them to further her position in society, miming the Biblical devil temptation. Eddie continues to have tea with Anna after Portia's revelations about the diary, further souring her opinion of him. Portia was supposed

to have tea with her friend, Lillian, but she comes home early to discover Anna and Eddie having tea, her first time seeing Eddie since returning from the seaside. Portia realizes she "was in the wrong; she was not expected" (325), implying Eddie and Anna purposely met without Portia to discuss her in secret. Before Portia can establish herself in London, Eddie discusses her antics at the seaside with Anna. He even tells Anna how Daphne was "holding [his] hand" (336). Anna had already thought Portia was silly in pursuing Eddie, reflecting on Eddie's half-hazard pursuit of herself upon their introduction. This comment solidifies her belief that Eddie was not serious about a relationship with Portia. For Portia, "the idea of betrayal had been in her, upon her, sleeping and waking, as might be one's guilt, making her not confront any face with candour, making her dread Eddie" (337). Portia fears Eddie; in her succumbing to Eddie, Eddie has transformed into the devil, and she feels powerless against him. In seeing Anna and Eddie, Portia acknowledges Eddie has ruined her reputation, prompting her to distance herself from the elite British sphere permanently.

Austin Allan points to Portia's proposal to Major Brutt as the brink of disaster and how Portia must be "saved" to escape from the "devil." Anna expresses her concern for Major Brutt throughout the novel, attempting to find him a job with Thomas to save him from the embarrassment of expulsion and unemployment. Portia tells Major Brutt "she has nowhere to be" (Allan 8), indicating she no longer has a place in British society. Portia feels embarrassed and could solidify her role as an outcast by marrying Major Brutt, or Thomas and Anna could rescue her and bring her back into society. The devil has convinced Portia she has no place in British society, and she is therefore tempted to reject it entirely by marrying a man who is already an outcast. In marrying Major Brutt, Portia would be turning away from the religion that is British high society, and in the eyes of the members of this society, committing herself to a life of sin.

Eddie embodies all three iterations of biblical temptation: The World, The Flesh, and The Devil. He dis-

tracts Portia from her path into society as a worldly temptation; he causes Portia to worry about factors about herself that have nothing to do with her position in British society as a flesh temptation; he encourages her to throw away British society entirely as the devil. The comparison between British society and religious practice reveals the strictness of British society, equalizing hell to being a social outcast, while also allowing readers to evaluate what is "hell" in their society, and what "temptations" lead to this fate. Portia and Eddie do not have a healthy relationship, but he does more than make her sad; he jeopardizes her spot in society and analogously tempts her to live a life of sin. Bowen's analogy between British society and the church emphasizes the social need for rules and structure. Once, religion provided this. However, as organized religion loses prominence in Western societies, it is replaced by social structures that operate in analogous ways.

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