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## **The Terrible Truth: The Exploration of True Crime, the Supernatural and Gothicism in Joseph Shearing's *The Crime of Laura Sarelle***

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The novels written by Marjorie Bowen under the Joseph Shearing pseudonym are the key focus in this paper as they feature the recurring Bowenesque themes of darkness, the supernatural and the gothic in combination with the historical. Shearing novels are distinct from those written under the pseudonyms of Marjorie Bowen and George Preedy because they also feature one important element that the Bowen and Preedy novels did not and that is the genre of true crime. Although the Shearing novels are essentially historical novels, the true crime element makes the historical focus quite different to the novels written and published under the Marjorie Bowen pseudonym. Yet, the Shearing novels still retain sinister gothic undertones. In this paper, there will be a thorough and general examination of the novels published under the Joseph Shearing pseudonym followed by a close textual analysis of Shearing's novel *The Crime of Laura Sarelle* published in 1941.

The Joseph Shearing novels maintain a number of recurring themes throughout each piece of work. The themes of wealthy families, financial difficulties and an inability to break free from monetary constraints, secrets, lies, deception and murder proliferate these novels. There were around sixteen novels published under the Joseph Shearing pseudonym which ensued quite late during the span of Marjorie Bowen's career. They were published between 1932 and 1951 and many of them were based on authentic homicide cases that had occurred in the nineteenth century. These novels proved to be highly popular in Shearing's day, both in England and also in America, due to the English, American, European and Caribbean settings - London, Manchester, Kentucky, Paris and Jamaica are just a few of the settings. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was the key focus period for Shearing's historical true crime novels, from the first quarter of the nineteenth century until the late nineteenth century, and they make consistent use of essentially nineteenth-century fictional formats, strategies and devices. They can be considered to fit into several different genres as they are gothic, true crime and the historical novel combined. She took actual criminal cases from the past by researching old newspapers, engaging with historians, reading old memoirs, guide-books, essays, travel books and legal files and recreated them fictionally, usually detailing in her preface the sources for such material and what she perceived to be the likely circumstances that surrounded such crimes. This would have allowed Bowen to further expand her literary interests of exploring issues of the past while drawing on her own discontents with the present. After the First World War and with the Second World War looming in the not too distant future, the gothic would have remained as the genre in which writers could still attempt to explore, dissect and examine the ghosts of the past and the perceived wretchedness within their present. This wretchedness was due to the economic crisis at home and abroad, international tensions, menacing European dictators, major unemployment, poverty and labour unrest at home. There are also various accounts in published memoirs from which these novels have been developed.

The range of themes indicated in these novels were, *Forget-me-Not* published in 1932, which explored the case of a governess accused of being an accomplice in the famous Praslin murder case in 1840s revolutionary France; *Album Leaf* published in 1933 which also explored a governess who fell in love with the wrong man and was suspected of being an accomplice to a murder among relatives with a vast inheritance as the motive; *Moss Rose* published in 1934 was based on the story of a noble, unscrupulous, poverty-stricken, fallen from grace female who, in knowing the face of a wanted murderer, turns to blackmail to survive; *The Golden Violet*, *The Story Of A Lady Novelist* published in 1936 explores slavery and racism in Jamaica in the 1800s which interestingly does not paint the black characters as evil savages but as more morally correct, respectful and loving than their white counterparts; *Blanche Fury* in 1939 is based on the murder of distant cousins by the true and rightful unacknowledged heir to the family fortune; *Aunt Beardie* is a curious tale of secrets, prostitution, blackmail and murder within France and England published in 1940; *The Crime of Laura Sarelle* covers a story of madness, murder and familial curses among aristocratic descendants published in 1941;

*The Spectral Bride* published in 1942 is also a tale of blackmail, murder, madness and those doomed to repeat the crimes of their forefathers; *Airing in a Closed Carriage*, in 1943, explores the ambiguous guilt of a woman who was accused of murdering her traitorous and abusive husband and was sent to jail; *So Evil My Love*, published in 1947, tells the story of evil, blackmail, murder, jealousy and deception; *Mignonette*, in 1949, is based on the murderous crime committed by a strange, intriguing and attractive young woman; *The Heiress of Frascati*, published in 1950, tells the story of familial treacheries and a stolen inheritance and *To Bed At Noon*, published in 1951 - the novel's title sharing the reference to Shakespeare's *King Lear* as stated by Shearing in the preface and set in the state of post-pioneer Kentucky in the 1800s, is about a doomed love between a young female aristocratic outsider and a young lawyer with a developing reputation of respect within his social faction. The Shearing novels differ greatly in their creation and consequently, they explore a number of genres, literary themes and aspects, for example gender relations and the class system, while continuing to maintain a distinctive and subtle critique of society. Shearing explored general social issues such as prejudice, inequality and greed, which were common features within many societies and different periods which she subtly highlights and Shearing did not do this for moral reasons but observational ones. Bowen did not believe that art was for ethical and moral purposes, nor either for purely sensational reasons but more as an exploration of how life was as she perceived it – the acute examination of human frailty and suffering.

In addition to such suffering, the female characters in *Aunt Beardie* continuously acknowledge their awareness and intuition. Though they have learnt to ignore this and follow rational modes of thought, Shearing shows that a woman's intuition always comes to the fore. Bowen consistently creates, across many different societies and various situations, the common theme of romance versus reason. This is Bowen's literary exploration of romanticism versus reason and intuition versus rational practicality. Intuition, perhaps our true nature as believed by the romantics, can never be truly ignored. The characters in these novels are always in touch with their emotions and sentiment, which in turn leads to melancholy and a severe existential crisis. Idleness and inertia dominate the world of the aristocracy and amongst the poverty-stricken is the inability to fit within class distinctions which plagues those of lower birth. There is not a single character who is content in the Shearing novels as all suffer from the shadows of existential nihilism.

In the Conway Hall Arts lecture by Marjorie Bowen given in 1939 in London, the foreword states “Ultimately art is concerned with one value and one value only: truth...In fiction it has laid bare the psychological motives which determine our actions; and generally art has discovered that the imagination is an instrument of revelation.”<sup>1</sup> Bowen's novels under the Shearing pseudonym essentially have this aim, usually within the mind of the perpetrator, the murderer, the accomplice and not necessarily in the victim, though this can sometimes vary as the victims are not always wholly innocent. The link between the preceding actions of the victim and the perpetrator's crime is quite clearly depicted within the narrative and the murderer's mind. The criminal's sense of injustice is linear and ultimately psychologically outlined and defined stylistically by Shearing.

In presenting the Joseph Shearing pseudonym to the public, Bowen in an effort to reinvent her fiction across the globe and herself as an author, offered an underlying and eerily familiar world, a world which represented the twist the modern world had taken - that the enemy was not unseen as had been previously perceived in literature, that the enemy was inhuman which had also been a previous literary concept but that the enemy are those closest to us, physically, mentally and emotionally, that the enemy is human. Shearing portrayed a perception of a modern belief. She personified and characterised human evil, immorality and transgression and showed this as naturally occurring phenomena completely independent of the categorization of religion or doctrines of sin.

She also then explored how the legal system played its part in the result of such human endeavours. This is central to how she uses the Joseph Shearing authorial voice. The Shearing texts certainly appear to retain elements of sensationalist literature, which appears to be in direct contrast with the explicit and unequivocal true crime genre. *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction* illuminates the sensation novel as preserving components of class, race and gender. Yet Bowen examines the struggle of the lower and middle classes against the aristocrats and those of noble birth, the struggle of the lower classes against the upper classes is in direct contrast with the conservative tendency of preservation.

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<sup>1</sup> Marjorie Bowen, Conway Hall Arts Lecture, London, April 19<sup>th</sup>, 1939

In *Blanche Fury*, the distant cousins who arrogantly assume their position in the vast mansion of an ancestor are ruthlessly murdered by the rightful heir who maintains the land. Bowen is not on the side of legitimate property ownership even when secured by murder but there is a problematic aspect at play here as Bowen deliberately presents a circumstance where no one is right, despite the murderous crime committed and a villainous protagonist who the reader can sympathise with. In *The Spectral Bride*, the only surviving young and vulnerable member of an old and ancient family descends into madness amidst the presence of a strange and unnerving ancestral curse while being tricked by two middle class sisters where class mobility and monetary gain is the sole ambition. In *So Evil My Love*, the married, rich and fragile Susan is manipulated by the evil, destitute and widowed missionary's wife Olivia Sacret. In all three novels, the aristocracy illuminate a class shift. They represent an outdated and old-fashioned tradition that is quickly slipping from their grasp. The lower class perpetrators, although they wish to be in a financially secure position and live a life of privilege, are unable to achieve their ambitions and the aristocratic victims are simultaneously unable to put an end to the persecution they are facing.

Many of the aristocratic characters in the novels are prone to manipulation, trickery and are often threatened with an unleashing of past secrets and betrayals by the perpetrators. The middle and lower class women are quite intelligent and strong by nature but they remain immobile due to their lack of financial and social security. Andrew Mangham claims the sensation novel was keen to establish "hybrid strategies of social renewal"<sup>ii</sup> and in a few of the Shearing novels, the middle and lower class women seek to join marital forces with the aristocratic men though to no avail. Shearing may have been keen to explore societies that were progressive as well as conservative within these novels. In *The Golden Violet*, the white female protagonist fell controversially in love with the black male protagonist during the period of slavery in the Caribbean. Was Bowen a strict sensationalist novelist? Perhaps not but the Shearing novels certainly show definite traces of the Victorian sensationalist legacy. The plots involve extreme, sensationalist, situations which can possibly be resolved into ultimately relieving sensationalist tales of social renewal despite the odds, but she refuses to follow this through. The novels have a quietly disturbing and interrogative effect with a degree of subtle criticism.

In *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, Mangham claims, "One aspect that Fin De Siècle inherited from sensation fiction was the obsession with dangerous female characters... in introducing what was often the dangerous woman's nemesis, the female sleuth, the sensation novel became crucial to the development of the New Woman genre. The latter, itself a significant foundation of the modernist age is well-known for its introduction of strong female characters and for raising questions of gender equality, sexual freedom and rights for women."<sup>iii</sup> Regarding new woman fiction in terms of sensationalist writing, Shearing did not include the role of a female sleuth in her narratives. Rather she investigated beneath the psychological surface of her dangerous female characters while raising questions of belonging, female social mobility and how to assume one's independence without having the means and the power to do so. Joy Wiltenburg's essay, 'True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism,' explores the literary aspects of sensationalism that can be used to define the genre, such as emotional responses, truth, moral piety, crime amongst family members, sexual scandals, problems in the marital sphere and economic plights.<sup>iv</sup> Wiltenburg's claim "These representations of crime mark a unique point of intersection between structures of power and normative emotional demands – between public order and the interior life of the individual... Yet the demand for truth, the insistence that the content derived from and bore directly on real life was an integral part of sensationalism,"<sup>v</sup> is interesting as these sensationalist aspects are definitively present in several Shearing texts. Wiltenburg proceeds to discuss the origins of the genre spanning its entirety, which began in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Europe and lasted until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The 16<sup>th</sup> Century, before the novel was established, also invariably shows the connections of sensationalist literature with the theatre, for example the drama revenge tragedy and the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Victorian melodrama as both feed into sensation fiction.

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<sup>ii</sup> Andrew Mangham, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013 p. intro

<sup>iii</sup> Mangham, *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction*, p.6

<sup>iv</sup> Joy Wiltenburg, 'True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism,' *The American Historical Review*, vol. 109, (December 2004) p. 1394

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid* p. 1384

At this time instead of crime being viewed as simply religious sin, crime became secular in many works and Wiltenburg discusses the literary viewpoint that crime could be avoided if one chose not to indulge in heightened feelings.<sup>VI</sup> Shearing does not acknowledge this in her work, although the secular aspect certainly appears. On the contrary, human existence and heightened emotion are paired in Shearing's novels. Crime can not necessarily be avoided as it is our inevitable interaction with each other that can lead to such extremities of emotion. Shearing showed crime could affect anyone.

Shearing builds suspense by placing the reader in the mind of the criminal, their actions leading to such crimes, their activities, their rationalisations and their desires. In some of the novels, the criminal is more interesting to the reader than the victim and this is portrayed in *Blanche Fury*, *Aunt Beardie*, *Airing in A Closed Carriage*, *To Bed At Noon and So Evil My Love* to name a few. The plots come from actual true crime cases and the psychological background is Shearing's own worthy contribution.

Her accounts trace their psychological deliberations and remain true to Marjorie Bowen's literary traits of evocations of mood and heightened suspense. Shearing used different historical criminal cases such as those based on the rich and poor, men and women, adolescents and adults, black and white races, to explore crime, precisely because, as previously mentioned here, it could affect everyone. There is a distinct engagement with evil here, not a theological evil but a moral evil, a psychological and imaginative evil which was one of the elements of Bowen's writing that continued to enthrall Graham Greene in the early stages of his career. It is similar to the interest we hold as readers, or at least as perceived by William Blake and Percy Bysshe Shelley, in the figure of Satan in Milton's *Paradise Lost* or in Lord Byron – the gothicised Byronic hero. Shearing is adhering to a precise romantic tradition, namely that the most fascinating individuals are often the most depraved and immoral characters.

Sensationalism was perceived by many to be for the lower masses which Bowen addresses in her arts lecture. She states fervently that art should not be condemned due to critics viewing it as morally wrong and lacking religious piety. It is interesting that Bowen took this viewpoint as she herself frequently negotiated a path between high-brow and middlebrow fiction, between high art and popular art and often sought to combine the two. Wiltenburg argues sensationalist crime fiction was constructed by emotional reactions in the position of the criminals in combination with the legal justice system's response to such crimes of passion, "Sensationalist crime accounts build their emotional potency on both a visceral response to violence itself and the quasi-religious dilemma posed by transgression of core values...Linking violent crime and criminal justice procedures with a prescribed emotional response both personal and communal, these works have been a powerful means of constructing both shared values and individual identity."<sup>VII</sup> This darkness, emotion and truth may have been what initially attracted Bowen to the genre. Joseph Shearing's work appealed to many, readers, critics and publishers alike, because her novels had the underlying hint of the loss of ideals in the modern period and she used art, as her contemporaries also did, to reflect this. Bowen said modern art is criticised for its lack of morals and defended its right to be so, but by so doing, she may have been trying to portray how the world has changed and it is good, perhaps even necessary, for art to reflect this. Wiltenburg argues that sensationalist authors deliberately imbued their true crime stories with a sense of religious morality.<sup>VIII</sup> Yet Bowen chose not to inherit this sense of religious authorial responsibility. She simply offered a depiction of society as she perceived it without authorial judgement requiring repentance on the part of the guilty party. She explored what could drive humans to commit such actions and the characters based on real-life notorious criminal events were used to reflect this.

Wiltenburg also discusses the presence of a "repentant criminal's voice" in such sensationalist narratives while firmly concentrating on the mechanisms of the criminal's mind. Shearing certainly uses the latter as this is a narrative device of hers used to deliberately focus on the villain of the story as well as any protagonists that are victims. This preferred technique is consistent throughout Bowen's work, including those in the historical and supernatural categories. Bowen's criminals however are not necessarily repentant, just as her victims are not always wholly blameless. However, to Bowen, there could never be perfect control over the emotions and consequently crime cannot always be avoided.

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<sup>VI</sup> Wiltenburg, 'True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism,' p. 1400

<sup>VII</sup> Wiltenburg, 'True Crime: The Origins of Modern Sensationalism,' p.1379 - 1380

<sup>VIII</sup> Ibid p.1385

In Fred Botting's *In A Gothic Darkly*, Botting recalls the political writings of Edmund Burke's *Reflections On The Revolution in France*, published in 1790, where Burke discussed and compared a bloodthirsty, violent revolutionary France with the ordered and rationalised England<sup>IX</sup> and of course it is well-documented that gothic literature began to flourish during this period and into the nineteenth century and beyond, eventually transmuting into romanticism, female fiction and the ghost story. Gothic is often about contrast and has been so in the original gothic fictions that followed the French Revolution. The aristocracy versus the bourgeoisie, the rational versus the irrational, nature versus the supernatural, evil versus good, light versus darkness and Bowen uses this Gothic technique of contrast in the Shearing novels, not to differentiate but to group entities together. In Bowen's novels, the destitute protagonist is as acutely trapped as the financially secure aristocrat and in portraying the gothic theme of difference and contrast, Bowen is showing the seriousness of similarity. There is little distinction despite the characters backgrounds. Their desires and passions are equally dark and tortuous in nature. In the Shearing novels, there are the upstanding, rational and methodical characters and there are the romantic and sensitive figures whose passions descend towards the verges of insanity yet neither character is content. All are troubled. All in some way, fare no better than the other in what Shearing presents as the uncontrollable forces of life, mystery, destiny and nature.

Long before Burke turned to discussing the political upheaval in France, he also wrote extensively on the imagination and the beautiful in nature and in our world in his 1757 discourse '*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*' which is an important work worthy of consideration when discussing the stylistic technique of the gothic genre. The other imperative piece of work that can also be considered in any gothic discourse is Sigmund Freud's essay, *Das Unheimliche* (The Uncanny) published in 1919, which discussed the eerie and the psychologically strange and terrifying, yet it is these strange circumstances that are also considered to be unnervingly familiar to us. In 'Gothic Sublimity,' David D. Morris states, "Gothic sublimity demonstrates the possibilities of terror in opening the mind to its own hidden and irrational powers. It is a version of the sublime which demands a psychology adequate to Freud's belief that the ego is not master in its own house."<sup>X</sup> Would it be accurate to say that the Shearing texts represent a part of the Freudian uncanny in novel form as the characters consistently lose control? Possibly, or at the very least it is an idea worth exploring in some of Bowen's work generally but not necessarily in the Freudian sense as we know it when considering gothic, supernatural and horror fiction. Bowen did not deliberately use the Freudian uncanny in the Shearing novels as a specific literary device because what happens in these novels is accounted for in human rather than supernatural terms, but her novels perhaps demonstrate the existence of the uncanny in life itself. This is because the uncanny resides purely, first and foremost, within human psychology. Where ancestral curses represent repetition, that is a psychological compulsion to repeat ancestral patterns of behaviour, those descendants are doomed to repeat the murderous deeds of their ancestors; where the encouragement of female fragility, the dumbing of the intellect, female entrapment and sexual female secrets within a male sphere indicates repression; the uncontrolled alter-ego, the double, that erupts out of sheer circumstantial desperation and indulges in criminal acts. Shearing, perhaps more venturesome in this than the Bowen persona, took such Freudian ideas of the uncanny and placed them distinctly within the ordinary citizen and within their own consciousness as Freud himself may have also perceived them.

It may be worth noting here that the reader does not necessarily experience terror while consuming the Shearing novels. The reader may experience a subtle sensation of eerie chills perhaps, but not fear necessarily as the terror is constricted within the characters themselves. The readers are voyeurs. Shearing maintains a subtle distance and inspires an almost vivid fascination at the cruelty of and disappointment in human relations. Death in Bowen's work is not simply an action, a result, it pervades through her entire work and this is her gothic link, the mark of Bowen's writing as a true gothic descendant. Morris argues, "Death in the Gothic novel is not conceived in linear relation to life...Life in Gothic fiction never frees itself from the presence or threat of death."<sup>XI</sup> The Shearing texts were marketed by the publishers as 'Queen Size Gothic' and there could be several reasons for this. The darkness and the mechanism of the psyche dominantly prevailed within the backdrops of gloomy spheres.

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<sup>IX</sup> Fred Botting, *A Companion to Gothic*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, 2000, p.6

<sup>X</sup> David B. Morris, 'Gothic Sublimity,' *New Literary History*, vol.16, no.2, *The Sublime and the Beautiful: Reconsiderations*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, (Winter, 1985) p. 310 - 311

<sup>XI</sup> David B. Morris, 'Gothic Sublimity', p. 308

The threatening labyrinthine cities, numerous male tyrants and female victims, betrayals, secrets and lies that abound within these novels and using the Gothic as a tool to explore the morally encumbered present are just a few of the possible explanations for such marketing strategies. It is the particular use of death that binds her authorial voice to this genre. Unnatural death is the result of desperation and desperation surely just may be the result of desire. The endings are rarely conclusive, never wholesome but an indication of the shadow of the horror and terror that surrounds us consistently. The terror does not end with death but exemplifies it.

A number of Shearing's novels were adapted into theatre productions from the 1940s to the 1960s and it is interesting that Hollywood chose to use the British fiction of Shearing for film adaptation during this time, particularly as this was also during the era of the masterfully gripping and enthralling films of the famous film director and producer Alfred Hitchcock. This was the era of Hitchcock filmmaking and Hollywood producers seem to have sensed unnerving quasi-Hitchcockian possibilities in these texts. Some of Shearing's/Bowen's work that were made into films were - *Blanche Fury* filmed as *Blanche Fury* (1948), *Airing in a Closed Carriage* filmed as *The Mark of Cain* (1947), *So Evil My Love* also known as *For Her To See* filmed as "Lux Video Theatre: *So Evil My Love*" (1955), *Mistress Nell Gwynne* (filmed as *Nell Gwyn* (1926), *General Crack* (filmed as the American film *General Crack* (1930), Bowen's play *Captain Banner* (filmed as "BBC Sunday-Night Theatre: *Captain Banner*" (1954), The short horror story *The Avenging of Ann Leete* (filmed as "*Matinee Theatre: Avenging of Ann Leete*" (1957) and *Moss Rose* filmed as *Moss Rose* (1947). When considering the popularity of the Shearing novels particularly in America and within the cinematic sphere, it begs the question as to why the Shearing novels were so vastly popular across the globe and appealed to such directors as Alfred Hitchcock, the British film director and producer Herbert Wilcox and the American director, actor and producer Gregory Ratoff and Irish film director Brian Desmond Hurst, who all made films based on the Shearing novels. It is interesting to note that the Shearing novels also contained elements of noir fiction which consistently viewed immoral acts through the eyes of the criminal or the victim. Film Noir represented great and opulent escapist films of the modern period and it is fair to claim that the Joseph Shearing section of Bowen's output was so extraordinarily visual it also appealed to filmmakers. The novels and the films had a specifically targeted British and American audience and were categorically made into British and American film noir motion pictures.

In the essay 'Murder As Social Criticism,' Catherine Nickson believed that the attractiveness of the detective novel from the nineteenth century into the twentieth century was due to the perception of the accelerated and alarming rate of crime and aggression in modern society and the popularity of Roman noir and film noir simultaneously offered explorations of morality and the debilitating effects of modernity on contemporary society, as Nickson wrote, "Roman noir presents, in other words, a corrective history of a still-remembered past as well as the expression of a whole set of anxieties about employment, gender and material happiness in the 1930s and '40s."<sup>xii</sup> It appears that even within her crime and gothic fiction, Shearing/Bowen consistently used the past to examine the present and used notorious crimes of the past to dramatize as she believed they were able to portray the social issues within her own present time both in her home country of England and abroad in America.

Despite the popularity of the detective novel whose main focus was to explore the crime from the detective's viewpoint, Shearing chose to shift the perception from the detective in her novels to the perpetrators and the victims. She was infinitely more interested in the crime itself and the criminal's state of mind and using true crime for the basis of her criminal plots serves to heighten its effects. The detective, if he or she appears in the novels, appears albeit rather briefly and this may explain why several of Shearing's novels appealed to film directors as there is a definitive link here between crime fiction, film noir, Roman noir and Shearing's literary aspects. The Shearing novels cannot be placed within any one generic category of fiction as it pertains elements of so many categories, namely sensationalism, mystery, thriller, gothic and true crime. It could be said that the Shearing novels could perhaps have been perceived by film directors as film noir in fiction form though with a more heightened and profound sense of psychological exploration. In 'Crime, Guilt and Subjectivity in Film Noir,' Winifred Fluck wrote, "Film Noir deals with crime...but shifts the issue of crime from gangster to ordinary citizen. With this shift, questions of moral responsibility and the puzzle of criminal motivation move to the centre of the noir-narrative..."

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<sup>xii</sup> Catherine Nickson, 'Murder as Social Criticism,' *American Literary History*, vol. 4 (Winter, 1997) p. 744

These noir theories of the subject range from the authentic self of the American outlaw and the repressed self of popular Freudianism” to an “empty” self-driven by desire, impulse and mood that is subject only to the absurd guilt of the wrong impulse.”<sup>xiii</sup> The psychology of the main characters is the key focus in Shearing's texts certainly, however she does not present her characters as “empty” but rather the opposite and this possible guilt stems more from abject desperation as a consequence of their troubled circumstances as opposed to impulse stemming from a vacant existence. Their crimes are immoral but not usually meaningless. The perpetrators always have reasons, justifiably or indefensibly, to commit the crimes they do. Though Shearing has many aspects in common with film noir and Fluck acknowledges film noir to be based on fiction that was created by Dostoevsky for example, her claim that crimes were committed because of empty voids in one's own life can be further explored.<sup>xiv</sup> Perhaps this point is fair and valid but it may also be interesting to state that such crimes were never vacuous. Each perpetrator within every story told will always have distinct reasons for their crime, even if the reasons only remain logical to them. The Shearing texts are emotional and irrational explorations of a criminal's psyche framed within the backdrop of a romantic and gothic framework. This is presented without the juxtaposition of the rational reasoning of a calm and collected detective unperturbed by the littered remnants of destruction left behind by those involved in crimes of passion.

Bowen's penchant for darkness and remembering the past unsurprisingly finds creative expression through genres such as crime, sensation fiction and gothic. The sense of melodrama in her novels feeds into the sensational aspect of her fiction which in turn was effectively processed into cinematic and pictorially vivid sensationalism on film. The American popularity of the Shearing novels could be due to the mood within American society at this time. Though Bowen was certainly no modernist in narrative technique, she shared something of the modernist vision of dislocation and hollowness of T.S. Eliot and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Like them she registers isolation, distrust, decline and a craving for past ideals and, as Fluck argues, these were specifically related to the post-war period in America, the abject and torturous suffering of existential nihilism and despair due to the inability to find one's freedom.<sup>xv</sup>

Bowen as Shearing, like Bowen as Bowen, deliberately placed a sense of ambiguity within her novels. As previously mentioned, the perpetrators are not necessarily evil incarnate and the victims are not necessarily wholly innocent and the extent of their guilt can certainly be debated. Yet on some level, all her characters retain a degree of guilt in relation to choices made in the past. The exploration of criminal guilt was central to film noir at the time, as Fluck assures us.<sup>xvi</sup> But the Shearing novels depicted an all-encompassing human guilt and suffering where the ability for criminal endeavours varied. Shearing examined what could drive an idea, a thought, a desire into possible motivation. In these novels, each set of circumstances is placed before the reader to portray the steps leading to the criminal intent and consequently the murder itself. It should be noted here that Shearing's characters tend to display more profound strength of character rather than the inherent weakness as discussed in Fluck's argument as their motivation does not usually curtail from characteristic weaknesses. They commit their crimes due to desperation, love, poverty, desire, ambition, entrapment and injustice. Shearing often focused on female characters committing crimes, though some male protagonists were used also, not necessarily because they were depicted as femme fatales but because of a duality in nature - a persecuted and unhappy woman driven to the depths of despair alongside a determination to escape from circumstantial constraints. Such women are always financially ensnared by men. The male characters who commit the crimes are simultaneously ensnared by the women, albeit emotionally either by love, hate or a tantalisingly cold disregard. In all there is a longing for a different set of circumstances to the ones they find themselves in, which often spirals out the borders of sanity into absolute madness such as in *The Crime of Laura Sarelle* and *The Spectral Bride*. This could be the reason for Shearing's appeal as the stories embodied all the cinematic drama and darkness of film noir while simultaneously offering a more acute understanding of human nature in all its complexity in true Bowenesque form.

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<sup>xiii</sup> Winifred Fluck, 'Crime, Guilt and Subjectivity' In *Film Noir*, 'Amerikastudien/American Studies' 46:3, vol.46, no.3, 2001, p.381

<sup>xiv</sup> Ibid p.381

<sup>xv</sup> Winifred Fluck, 'Crime, Guilt and Subjectivity in Film Noir,' p. 381

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid p. 381

In the Conway Hall Arts Lecture, Bowen said “The nineteenth century produced great artists and began reforms we are now trying to complete...The form must continuously change or the art die.”<sup>xvii</sup> This was Bowen’s literary aim as she perceived it and this belief is deeply embedded within her work as she consistently returned to the past to expand on the present by continuing past literary traditions. With this lecture, Marjorie Bowen is referring to those that are shocked by modern art because they prefer the art of the past which they believed retained more virtue and less evil. This, to Bowen, is irrelevant and unappreciative as modern art in her day originates from the past and is continuing and progressing while still exploring tradition and the artist must be allowed to do this. She rejected those who deemed modern art as immoral.

It could be fair to say here, particularly with the consideration of the number of genres that the Shearing novels drew upon, that Bowen herself as a writer cannot fit into any specific literary category because she perceived art as a skill that did not have to be neatly categorised. Though carrying on past literary traditions was essential to her authorial voice, compounded of gothicism, historical romance and romanticism to name just a few, the inspiration for new thought must also be present. She researched, wrote a biography of and was an admirer of Mary Wollstonecraft but while exploring feminism in her work also sought to place the female apart from feminism, hinting in the biography, that despite a woman's wish for freedom and independence, she could still be trapped by men emotionally. This notion could be viewed as both feminist and anti-feminist as she sought to understand the female tragedy of entrapment. She was keen to instil the idea in her novels that human happiness and fulfilment could transpire from a reformed structure of marriage, marriage that could and should offer equality and partnership between the sexes. She believed evil was beyond the devil and religious sin and a human responsibility. She adhered to the romanticism versus reason debate which is consistent within her characters and narratives as two opposing forces but ultimately the same human suffering can still reside within both. Overwrought and tortuous human emotion and pain are placed against human complacency and indifference, nihilism is contrasted with purpose, the spirituality and intuition is more powerful than superstition and institutional religion. The Shearing texts are a complicated mix of unique explorations regarding the human existence structured by the themes and forms of inherited literary traditions.

Joseph Shearing’s *The Crime of Laura Sarelle*, published in 1941, is a dark and emotive tale where time, the past and the present, are mirrored against each other in acute synchronicity amidst a framework of diabolical greed and murderous intent. The novel tells the story of a nineteen year old woman who is tormented by the secret past of her family and her namesake - the prior Laura Sarelle. The previous Laura Sarelle lived in the same house sixty years ago where the unfortunate present Laura and her brother Theodosius now reside.

The Sarelles are an English aristocratic family whose wealth and social position are apparent to the reader from the outset and Laura and Theodosius, both born in Jamaica, now live in Leppard Hall, a sinister and gloomy mansion in Warwickshire. Laura is a difficult and free-spirited character who is fully aware of her dreams and desires but her brother presides, he rules and controls her life socially, emotionally and financially. He is master of the house and of Laura. Both siblings, despite their rich tapestry of a familial history, are orphans and have very few living relatives. The cold-hearted Theodosius is the sole guardian of his sister, his refusal to entertain society or to allow Laura to build relations with those of the same class ensures their isolation within their own social ranks. Theodosius wishes to see his sister married, not because he cares and considers her happiness but simply because he desires to remove her from his life and what he perceives as a maddening responsibility towards a woman he cannot understand. In his mind, she is simply a burden, a wretched nuisance and a constant source of irritancy. His sole wish is for Laura to marry a suitable man of his own choosing which will leave him free to live as a recluse and able to indulge in his one scholarly interest - studying the ancient classics and the Greek philosophy of times past, the remnants of his classical education at Eton and Magdalen College in Oxford, Oxford which was the decadent Oscar Wilde’s College and may be significant when considering Shearing’s literary interests.

Theodosius succeeds in finding a husband for Laura, a distant cousin named Harry Mostyn who greedily desires the Sarelle fortune and Laura's huge dowry after his own lavish expenses and the maintaining of his appearances has left him in dire financial constraints. At the beginning of the novel, the reader discovers Laura's heart belongs to another man, Lucius Delaunay. Lucius, a man with a keen sense of integrity, duty and love towards Laura, is Theodosius' old school friend and the employed steward of Leppard Hall.

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<sup>xvii</sup> Bowen, Conway Hall Arts Lecture



Lucius is equal to Theodosius in every manner. With his good Irish birth and aristocratic descent, his intelligence and inquiring mind, his equality to Theodosius is apparent. However, Lucius unfortunately lacks wealth and financial stability, despite his ancestral background and Theodosius, though he pretends Lucius is his friend, still perceives him as a paid servant. Yet Lucius, in addition to his equality regarding intelligence and cleverness, also surpasses Theodosius in manners, wit, personality and charm. Lucius' empathic, romantic and sensitive nature is sharply juxtaposed against the cold and distant nature of Theodosius.

Lucius eventually asks for Laura's hand in marriage which Theodosius forbids and vehemently denies. Regarding the proposal as an utter betrayal from his old friend, he furiously orders Lucius to leave the house and terminates his role of steward for the surrounding grounds. Laura, already on the verge of a breakdown due to her entrapment and emotional imprisonment, rapidly continues her spiralling mental descent. Theodosius' cruel treatment of his sister is largely the result of a terrible family secret he desperately wishes to keep buried. The village residents are sworn to secrecy and the plot of the novel is shrouded in suspense and mystery as both Laura and Lucius embark on separate journeys in an attempt to uncover the fiercely guarded secret of Leppard Hall, the secret that not only Theodosius but also all the previous male heirs have sought to keep hidden. The reader eventually discovers that the Laura Sarelle of sixty years ago was involved in the sudden death of her brother, that there was an inquest in 1780, that she too was in love with someone else she was forbidden to marry and as the story unfolds, it is evident that the characters in this novel are doomed to repeat the actions of those that previously occupied Leppard Hall.

*The Crime of Laura Sarelle* is not a traditional ghost story. The ghosts are of an entirely different nature in the novel, they live inside the heads of those that dwell in the house and this is where they thrive. However, Laura's own hauntings, visions and fears progress much further than mental degeneration. Her phantoms actually resemble, not just apparitions, but also the spectral possession of a human soul.

The novel opens with Laura's demands to her brother that he remove the two life-size portraits of a man and a woman, the woman is the previous Laura from sixty years ago and the other a man whose name is unknown until the mysterious plot begins to further unravel. The novel, as with quite a few of the Shearing texts is atmospheric, vivid and visual. The novel, in parts, is a description in colour and represents Shearing's personal interest in fine art and her optic awareness. One of the portraits which Laura so vehemently dislikes is by the English portrait painter, Thomas Gainsborough, and Shearing describes the portraits and landscape in vibrant detail and briefly hints at the landscape beyond the portrait which Gainsborough is so renowned for creating. Theodosius refuses to give into what he perceives as Laura's whimsical demands and immediately, the reader can recognise Theodosius' mistake. It is clear to the reader that the two ominous portraits appear to represent the spirits of the dead and it is their presence in the room, their belongings that still remain in the mansion, that effectively bring the past swiftly back into the present. The brother is once again murdered by the sister in order to be with the man she loves and the one she is forbidden to marry.

Interestingly the name of the protagonist, Laura, which relates to laurel leaves, appears to represent the symbol of honour and triumph. Laurel leaves are evergreen as they do not immediately fade but they are also extremely poisonous and Laura's plan to murder her brother and frame Harry Mostyn for the crime is certainly triumphant for a time. Theodosius dies from a poisonous concoction distilled from the laurel bushes outside Laura's bedroom window and she is victorious in the fact that her plan certainly runs smoothly until Harry and Lucius quickly devise her intentions and the real culprit behind Theo's untimely death. Yet at the end of the novel, the reader is left wondering who the real murderer actually is – the present Laura Sarelle in the 1840s or the dead Laura Sarelle from the 1780s as Harry Mostyn sees two Lauras wandering about in the woods on the night of the murder. This is the only time we are given a hint of the Laura Sarelle from the past in actual physical, albeit ethereal, form. The name Laura is also representative of a beloved and a beautiful idealised figure from the Elizabethan and Renaissance periods, which Laura Sarelle with her dark and unusual exquisiteness, certainly appears to personify. Shearing similarly explains the meaning behind the name, “The breeze in the bushes, L'aura...A pun used by Petrarch in his sonnet to his Laura.”<sup>xviii</sup>

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<sup>xviii</sup> Joseph Shearing, *The Crime of Laura Sarelle*, New York, Berkley Medallion Books, 1965, p. 45

The eighteenth-century definition of the word sensibility, as previously discussed in the earlier section of this paper, can be applied to the character of Laura. In fact, *The Crime of Laura Sarelle* is a pastiche proto-feminist novel of sensibility. Her frequent “follies and fancies” are representative of an emotional and fraught nature while her character is perceived as being acutely unstable by those around her. She is an extremely sensitive young woman whose natural intuitive ability remains strongly intact despite her difficult circumstances, her fierce longing for emotional freedom and desperation for release. Laura's physical ailments, namely fevers and headaches are a reaction to her environment, to her oppression and to her imprisonment. Despite her inner strength, she is also quite fragile and vulnerable. She does not attempt to hide her acute unhappiness and this consistently fraught emotional nature of hers does not bode well with her brother. Theodosius single-handedly creates the sheltered and cold environment she has to live in and consequently, her emotional pain starts to physically manifest. The book *Sensibility and Female Poetic Tradition 1780-1860: The Legacy of Charlotte Smith* by Claire Knowles heralds Emily St Aubert as the example of the Heroine of Sensibility in Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Emily's fragility, artistic ability, romantic nature and her suffering were positive and definitive traits for a heroine of sentimental literature and these traits allowed the reader to be able to empathise with Emily's difficulties throughout the novel.<sup>XIX</sup> This is similar to the plight of Laura Sarelle. The reader can certainly empathise with Laura's difficult domestic situation and the sense of a profound claustrophobia certainly enhances the narrative. Yet while Emily's nature was inherently good, Laura slowly becomes a manipulative murderer without regret. Sensibility is portrayed as a valuable trait in Gothic novels which Shearing certainly appears to use but she also showed the alternative side to sensibility portrayed in such a text; that is fragility and disempowerment eventually leading to a diabolical mentality and the distortion of morality in order to escape a tyrannical situation. Laura's unbearable circumstances change her. Shearing shows how pain and suffering can eventually lead to murderous intent, revenge and a loss of innocence.

Sensibility is perceived by Shearing as good but it is those who do not possess this trait and cannot see the worth of acknowledging and understanding the emotional side of human nature that is deemed as negative. In discussing sensibility, Ann Jessie Van Sant refers us to the French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who believed sensibility was akin to morality and tender feeling towards mankind.<sup>XX</sup> It is the reason why Theodosius, who in his complete lack of innate sensibility, is able to see his sister with such abject distaste and treat her with such merciless cruelty.

Ann Wierda Rowland's survey of Romantic Fiction discusses the immediately pre-Romantic 'sentimental' philosophy of David Hume and Adam Smith who believed in passion over logic and rationality and Smith's respect for “one [who] puts himself in the situation of another”<sup>XXI</sup> is evident here. There was a definitive touch of sentimentality or emotional identification in Shearing herself as a writer and this enabled her to mirror such strong human emotion in her work as she was able to. The novel reflects the nineteenth century Romantic novel with strong gothic undertones for the twentieth century.

The novel is also an exploration of gender. Two siblings, one male who is twenty-four years of age and one nineteen year old female, both equal in intelligence and strength of spirit, differ greatly, mostly because the male has the freedom. In addition to managing a large household, the accounts, the lands, the family wealth, the guardianship of his sister, he is also able to indulge in his revered pastime of translating ancient languages. Yet his sister is expected to simply learn how to manage the servants and uncomplicated domestic duties. Her brother feels she lacks the desire to learn what he terms the “female arts” as he constantly seeks to reduce her level to those of the tenants, the servants and those he perceives as below his own standing. The term “female arts” is quite ironic here as Laura does indeed wish for the chance to be able to exercise her interest in actual art - books, concerts, the opera, paintings and the theatre, all of which Theodosius looks upon with disgust. As mentioned previously, Laura is a sensitive woman whose instincts and intuition are at the core of her being, but the people around her perceive her intuition and her shrewdness as “follies” and “fancies.” She is trapped in an obscure and dark existence where logic and reason prevail, where Theodosius rules, where her romantic nature is stifled and unable to be exercised or suitably fulfilled.

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<sup>XIX</sup> Claire Knowles, *Sensibility and Female Poetic Tradition 1780-1860*, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 1998, p.65

<sup>XX</sup> Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth Century Sensibility and The Novel: The Senses in Social Context*, New York, Cambridge University Press, p.6

<sup>XXI</sup> Katie Trumpener, Richard Maxwell, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Romantic Fiction*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 194

Consequently, Theodosius' intense dislike for his sister ensures Laura's downward spiral. The classical name Theodosius, which means "giving to god," was also the name of two emperors from the Roman and Byzantine eras and in this novel, Theodosius' word certainly presides. He is an intrinsically masculine figure who gives little but deems himself as a gift from the gods and his obsession with classical materials and ancient history displays a military point of view. He rules over them all, Laura, Lucius, Harry and Laura's weak companion, Mrs Sylk, who often goes against her own intuition at the expense of Laura's well-being, and determines everyone else's fate, including his own.

Laura and Theodosius (Theo) are two opposing forces, yet they do show similar veins of the same. Laura represents the uncanny nature of the world we live in. Her mind is an expanse of loneliness and reflects a disturbed and untamed nature. Sentiment, darkness and an unsurpassed and profound emotion exists within her. Alternatively, Theodosius represents a solid stoicism. Rationality and reason are at the core of his yearnings for a calm, orderly existence and peaceful surroundings. Laura's desire for companionship, art, romance and love is pitted against Theo's wish for a solitary life and the continuance of his studies of the Greek historian Arrian. Arrian, an historian in the ancient world, was the principle source of our information about stoic philosophy and as such a major figure in an inherently masculine intellectual history. Brother and sister are representatives of the oppressor and the oppressed, a callous quasi-stoic composure depicted within the oppressor brother versus the wild fury that characterises the oppressed sister, that may recall the young Jane Eyre and consequently, they both portray a sense of dismal repression. Theo, "a born celibate," gives up on his life, on marriage and children despite his young age and Laura, in spite of her own desperate efforts, will never be able to live her life independently away from Leppard Hall. It is a tale of fancy versus fact, emotion versus reason and Laura versus Theodosius. Lucius Delaunay, however, is a thought-provoking combination of the two: a character that is certainly able to fantasise, dream and love while still retaining the necessary degree of rationality and logic when needed. In the book *Gothic & Gender, An Introduction*, Donna Heiland claims gothic sensibility was perceived to acknowledge and support patriarchal frameworks or to disrupt it.<sup>xxii</sup> In *The Crime of Laura Sarelle*, Theodosius is the representation of a male dominated sphere and Laura herself is the disruption - the core opposition to such an imbalance between gender relations of the period.

The character of Theodosius is a by-product of the enlightenment age. He refers to himself as a stoic and a practical scholar, refusing to concede to, what he perceives to be, the whims of a foolish woman and the thoughtless superstitions of those around him. But Shearing presents superstition as an actual force of life to be reckoned with. It is the refusal to acknowledge the possibility of forces beyond our control that is Theodosius' downfall and the catastrophic unravelling of the two remaining Sarelles. It is clear to the reader that it is precisely superstition and evil omens that Theodosius should be acknowledging. The dreamy and trance-like effect of the house on the inhabitants is shown throughout the novel as the plot develops. Laura, Harry Mostyn and Mrs Sylk appear to invariably shift consciousness and mood, to another time and place where the secretive sinister events of the past slowly infiltrate the present. The house remembers and those that are sensitive to its past feel the dread that still lingers.

When considering the elements of the novel's front cover, *The Crime of Laura Sarelle* appears to retain all the motifs of a traditional Gothic story. The landscape looms dark and ominous in the gloomy background, we see the sharp outline of white marble graves within the mausoleum and we encounter the obligatory young woman resplendent in a flowing and richly embroidered gown with a fearful look in her eyes. According to the front cover, Laura appears to represent an innocent victim and she is, in the best Gothic tradition, victimised and oppressed, but at the novel's conclusion, it is Laura that we need to fear, not only due to her murderous actions but also because of the great intensity of her psychological imbalance. Catherine Spooner follows Chris Baldick in maintaining that a gothic text should comprise, "A fearful sense of inheritance in time within a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration."<sup>xxiii</sup> Psychological and physical imprisonment is the direct cause of Laura's mental instability. The house's furniture, the old clothes, the rich and ornate items of a period past and the unique artwork, represent an almost gothic stage and it is as strong a feature in this novel as in other gothic texts such as *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where the painting represents the past, mental degeneracy and malevolent sin.

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<sup>xxii</sup> Donna Heiland, *Gothic & Gender, An Introduction*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishing, 2004 p.12

<sup>xxiii</sup> Catherine Spooner, *Contemporary Gothic*, London, Reaktion Books Ltd, 2006, p. 18

*The Crime of Laura Sarelle* is a tale essentially of reincarnation, repetition and the paranormal. The present Laura feels she has previously occupied the hall before and it is almost as if her spirit is taking up the reins of where it left off in the past, “There are other things of hers up there too, and I dare say that after a while I shall feel that I am in the past again and that I am the other Laura Sarelle. But I hope I shan't die like she did, for that means I should have no more than five years or so left to live...I shall close my eyes and imagine what she was like and what she did. Perhaps her whole history will come back to me in a kind of trance, or dream.”<sup>XXIV</sup> For it does appear quite compellingly to the reader, that Laura's nature is split into two halves. She has a sense of an ominous duality about her which hints at the possibility of a possessed spirit. The sickly Laura, the emotional and unbalanced Laura is pale and frail, prone to fainting fits and weaknesses of the mind and yet the other part of Laura shows a distinct quickness of mental faculties, a natural determination and a keen resilience of spirit. By showing two alternate Lauras within the same novel, the novel has a dramatic sense of looking back. The present is continually haunted by the mistakes of the past and the novel itself is a reliving of the past – the story is the past incarnate.

Laura is a character who has the ability to unsettle and unnerve the reader. This is not necessarily instantly recognisable as insanity, for at times she appears quite lucid, but there are short bursts of an eerie quality about her that unsettles the reader from the outset and by doing so, the notions of the Freudian uncanny can be perceived within the text and within the character of Laura and her words, “So I have to come back here again after all these years.”<sup>XXV</sup> This gives us a sense of reincarnation and déjà vu amidst a sense of doomed repetition.

The village clergyman in the novel, Nathaniel Mist - the Hebrew name Nathaniel also meaning given by god, is a curious though not an immediately obvious character. In fact, he is quite as vague as his surname, Mist, suggests. He hovers with a sense of vagueness in the novel but it is he who is able to accurately describe the theme that the novel essentially plays upon – the human position between two worlds, life and death. His reference to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, “Wasn't it our great poet, our Swan of Avon himself, who said 'in that sleep, what dreams come'? I sometimes think that this whole place is infected with the dreams of the dead, that they can project them into very powerful forms, phantoms perhaps – whispers – suggestions,”<sup>XXVI</sup> is certainly representative of Bowen's/Shearing's literary interests. The Shearing novels are an exploration of unbearable lives and premature deaths, where murder and vengeance, often link the two together. Bowen's historical novels, supernatural horror stories and the mysterious gothic thrillers all revolve around the “dreams of the dead” concept and in conveying historical figures, true crime mysteries and the tales of the uncanny, the weird and the peculiar, Bowen/Shearing is essentially exploring the thoughts, sentiments and actions of the dead. The “whole place” that the Reverend Nathaniel Mist is referring to here is greater than the setting of the novel. It could be implying that the “whole place” is earth itself. Perhaps Shearing believed the consciousness of the living is consistently infiltrated by the dreams of the dead and that there are those who are more acutely sensitive to such presences than others. The past always influences the future and as a consequence, the dead can always affect the living. The Reverend Nathaniel Mist also obscures the harsh edges of reality, though in a much bleaker fashion. With the hint of the vaporous meaning behind his name, he is a distant and vague character in a lonely and unfulfilling world, and an almost spiritual mediator between death and physical reality.

There is a haunted disposition in a great deal of Bowen's work and it is this that creates the melancholic and evocative atmosphere that Bowen was so adept at creating. In examining the idea of “the dreams of the dead,” the novel is actually exploiting different states of consciousness which is similar to the Romantic appropriation of dreams, in works such as Samuel Coleridge's *Kubla Khan* and Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of An Opium Eater*.

However, the novel is not as fluently written in parts as some of the other Shearing texts. *Aunt Beardie*, *The Spectral Bride* and *The Golden Violet* are stronger in their creation. The specifics and the smaller details in *The Crime of Laura Sarelle* can sometimes appear weak, almost as if Shearing wrote the novel quickly and perhaps under some pressure. Aspects of Laura herself derive a little too obviously from the passionate frustrated heroines of Victorian fiction such as Jane Eyre or Maggie Tulliver.

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<sup>XXIV</sup> Shearing, *The Crime of Laura Sarelle*, pp.57-59

<sup>XXV</sup> *Ibid*, p.18

<sup>XXVI</sup> Shearing, *The Crime of Laura Sarelle*, Shearing, p.8

The phrase “eyes expressing fury” does not quite show the core extent of the emotional frustration and suppression that Laura is suffering at the hands of her tormentor. There are too many repetitive phrases and not enough consideration given to some of her descriptive prose. The words wild, wilful, caprices, fancies and whims are used too often in the text and some of the descriptions do not come quite as close to the wickedly simpering evil of Olivia Sacret in *So Evil My Love* or the haunting resonating ambience of the tale *To Bed At Noon*. Yet *The Crime of Laura Sarelle* is told with vigour. The quality of intimacy in her dialogue and the mentality of the characters certainly cement the novel's goal - to thrill her readers with fascination for such an interesting protagonist, for Laura is indeed interesting and a unique protagonist in various ways. She is vulnerable but in certain aspects, a true villain. She is at times weak but a robust character is clearly evident. The hints at her insanity is portrayed with a real perception of a spiralling descent as she forges closer to her crime and due to the clever intricacy of the plot, the reader is not even completely sure who the real murderer is at the novel's conclusion – Laura or the ghost of her namesake. The headstrong and independent female character is a particular trait within the Shearing novels and is akin to the strong and rebellious female characters within the novels of the Brontë sisters. Jane Eyre, Bertha Mason, Catherine Earnshaw and Laura Sarelle display hints of the same characteristics in a female gothic world amidst the framework of the noble (or at least big) house tradition, the large house that is witness to terrible events. The explicit supernatural phenomena at the end of Shearing's novel show all in this world can be haunted and it is indeed an excellent and extremely imaginative ending. To the other characters within the novel, the present Laura can appear quite distant from reality but to the reader, she is simply trapped within an unbearable situation. Perceived by others as continually “wild” and “wilful,” she displays an acute judgement of character and an uncanny ability to know other people's intentions without being timidly afraid to say so. Her candour and unreservedness display a sense of modern appeal and female independence, despite the shackles placed on her by her brother, and she is certainly different to the type of subservient woman Theodosius would have preferred her to be. Theo's perception of her as a disobedient irritant is to us a character that refuses to follow conventional rules and female domestic pretensions as would have been the behavioural modes of her time. Despite the apparent weaknesses of some of Shearing's prose within this novel, there are times when her writing simply flows with a certain vivacity and belief in such a richly constructed narrative.

There are no actual ghosts throughout this novel and the explicit supernatural phenomena does not occur until the novel's conclusion, but all the characters are profoundly affected by Leppard Hall. As previously mentioned, the two portraits are representations of ghostly embodiments and superstitions. They appear almost animated and their presence is greatly felt in the house as if they were in fact physical entities. Shearing may have been exploring the archaic idea that the souls of the dead were once understood to continue to exist within the portraits that were created when they were alive. Consequently, the dead in this context never wholly depart the living and if their souls were of a villainous and evil nature in life, this will continue in the same vein after their death. They impress upon the living to follow in the immoral footsteps of the dead and the living repeat the actions of those that preceded them. Certainly Harry Mostyn and the present Laura Sarelle are the prime examples of this as the thoughts of the husband of the dead Laura Sarelle, Captain Edward Avenshaw, appear to filter through Harry's mind as if they were his own. Laura Sarelle, as discussed earlier within this paper, is in effect two souls, two Lauras. The Laura from sixty years ago, growing ever present and stronger in Laura as the novel continues and her desperation grows, is a most unusual doppelganger. This is an evil twin who is already deceased. The reader is never fully acquainted with the Laura from the past but her presence is as strongly embodied within the text as the present Laura.

Due to the various themes in the novel, the categorical genre of this book is quite indeterminate as it touches upon several ideas and concepts, such as mystery, thriller, gothic, true crime and horror. The conclusion suggests it to be a combination of a gothic thriller and a supernatural ghost story and due to the structurally complex thematic mix, the reception of Shearing's work was a positive one. *The Crime of Laura Sarelle* represented an extreme form of a mystery thriller and the novel's features greatly contributed to the general popularity of the Shearing texts, albeit intense crime thriller mysteries with effective gothic and supernatural themes. Some of the reviews for Shearing's work were as follows: *The Spectral Bride* – “Really something...one of the master's finest works”<sup>xxvii</sup> in the *New York Herald Tribune*; “Addicts will be delighted...very fine and evil as anything.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

<sup>xxvii</sup> Joseph Shearing, *The Spectral Bride*, London, Sphere Books, 1973, p. back cover

<sup>xxviii</sup> Shearing, *The Spectral Bride*, p. back cover

A superb writer...a master of horror," in *The New Yorker* and "A true thriller of rare quality" in the *Birmingham Post* for *Blanche Fury*. Orville Prescott, the main book reviewer on *The New York Times* commented "So Evil My Love is a gruesomely fascinating story about a thoroughly wicked woman...By probing deep into Mrs Sacret's cold, smug mind and telling his story almost entirely from Mrs Sacret's point of view, Mr. Shearing has given, "So Evil My Love" a wonderfully intimate authority...and the mounting tension of the situation with evil on the verge of triumph is sustained...Joseph Shearing, as the author's small but loyal following knows, is one of the pseudonyms used by Mrs Gabrielle Margaret Vere Campbell Long, the brilliant and fabulously prolific author of more than 130 books...In the forty years since her first novel was published many writers have produced more important books than hers; but it is doubtful if any writer has produced as many good ones."<sup>XXIX</sup> In *The New Yorker*, Sally Benson believed, "Mr Shearing is a painstaking researcher, a superb writer, a careful technician, and a master of horror. There is no one else quite like him."<sup>XXX</sup> In a review of the novel *The Crime of Laura Sarelle*, the American literary critic Will Cuppy claimed, "Those who want a good workout of the more perilous emotions will do well to read Mr. Shearing's impressive tale of love, death and doom...Join the Shearing cult and meet one of the most malevolent females in song or story."<sup>158</sup>

The American literary critic and university lecturer, Professor Edward Wagenknecht (1900- 2004), included Bowen's works in his critical book *Seven Masters of Supernatural Fiction*, published in 1991, which makes it clear that his knowledge of her work is extensive. Bowen also consulted with Edward Wagenknecht regarding the historical material for the Shearing novel *To Bed At Noon*. Wagenknecht wrote a feature on Bowen, using her real name Gabrielle Margaret Campbell Long titled 'The Extraordinary Mrs. Long' published in *The New York Times* in 1943. In detailing and acknowledging her authorial flaws, the distinction between her being a great writer and a good writer, he succeeds in identifying the core essence of her talent. Marjorie Bowen was not a brilliant writer, he concedes, but she certainly showed very specific elements of creative dexterity and unusual skill. She may not have been "great" as such but much of her work certainly demonstrates elements of a unique and very rare quality. In detailing her ordinariness, he brings to the fore these extraordinary aspects to her writing. Wagenknecht claims, "I am not of course saying that Gabrielle Long is, in the largest sense of the term, a great writer. Nobody, I am sure, could be more embarrassed than she would by such a claim. She sees herself rather as "a woman who earned her living by writing fiction – with occasional essays in that kind of history deplored by historians." Her books are uneven; some of them have been made to order...Fatigue casts its shadow over some of her books; she is sometimes matter-of-fact; she does not always write the King's English correctly. But she is more than "a born story-teller;" she is a witch, a genius in the creation of atmosphere. When she is at her best, this atmosphere...is of a sinister or semisupernatural variety; it stirs the blood."<sup>XXXI</sup> Wagenknecht also examined the core focus of the Shearing novels and the literary interests that lay beneath the compositions, "The artist Joseph Shearing is drawn to crime and mystery as Conrad or the Brontës were drawn to them, not because they can be wrapped up in neat little artificial packages but because it is in extreme situations that the real capacities of human nature are revealed, and because human life itself is a mystery."<sup>XXXII</sup>

As Professor Wagenknecht and the critics illustrate here, the Shearing texts were popular in America and it leads one to examine the possible reasons for this popularity as mentioned previously when examining the transference of Shearing's work from the novel to film. In *Gothic America*:

*Narrative, History & Nation* by Teresa A. Goddu, Goddu explains the differences between British and American Gothic by claiming British Gothic reflected and explored social terrors due to its diverse cultural history and American Gothic, due to its less expansive but still significant history, is portrayed within the structures of mental dispositions.<sup>XXXIII</sup> This may explain Shearing's popularity in America. The Shearing novels utilise historical events of true criminal endeavours while simultaneously and profoundly exploring the mental states of the protagonists.

<sup>XXIX</sup> Orville Prescott, 'Books of The Times,' *The New York Times*, December 5, 1947

<sup>XXX</sup> Stanley J. Kunitz, Howard Haycraft, "Shearing, Joseph," *Twentieth Century Authors, A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature*, (Third Edition), New York, The H.W Wilson Company, 1950, (pp. 845-6) <sup>158</sup> Ibid, p.845-6

<sup>XXXI</sup> Edward Wagenknecht, 'The Extraordinary Mrs Long,' *The New York Times*, May 2 1943

<sup>XXXII</sup> Ibid

<sup>XXXIII</sup> Teresa A. Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History & Nation*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997, p. 3-12 <sup>162</sup> Morris, *Gothic Sublimity, The Sublime and the Beautiful*, p. 310 - 311

Psychological instability and social awareness were some of the strongest subject matters within her work. Also, a novelist with a strong sense of history and an understanding of the repercussions of the past would have been keenly desired and admired at such a time in history, particularly as the Americans were just entering the European war and consequently, thereby entering the European world. This perhaps showed an American nostalgia for English Romanticism.

There is a wide-ranging assertive spiritual dimension, perhaps, as distinct from a sense of institutionalised religion, in the Shearing novels as in other work by Bowen. Shearing alludes to a spirituality which is not closely embedded in a religious context and has no room for penance or punishment for sin as religiously understood. Spirituality is an important part of her fiction and is portrayed as a significant fragment of the human experience. There is an element of the inexplicable and the dangerous which touches gothic fiction and Bowen explored this idea also within her short ghost stories. The idea that the dead speak again, that the dead never completely leave the living, whether psychologically or physically or indeed both, flourish in her ghost stories. Writers of gothic literature and the intense prevalence of the ghost story into the Edwardian period and further into the twentieth century showed an increasing awareness amongst these writers that the enemy, that is the demonic or demonised Other, was much closer to home than had previously been written about in the nineteenth century. Shearing's novels reaffirmed this belief. If the ghost stories prevalently believed the enemy was externally close, then the Shearing novels deemed that the enemy was psychologically within. In *Gothic Sublimity*, Morris' claim, "It is not Walpole's ghosts who inspire terror, but the ghosts we carry within us,"<sup>162</sup> shows the enemy is not just the ghosts of our past within us but this claim can also pertain to the sinister, less humane and the vengeful part of ourselves. Shearing's characters are immersed in a complex of dualities – the past and the present, the living and the dead, the innocent and the aggrieved, the victim and the perpetrator. The link between Joseph Shearing's gothic sensationalist true crime fiction and Marjorie Bowen's ghost stories is ultimately poignant suffering and death. The unwavering shadow of mortality, spiritualism and ghosts that was so present in *The Crime of Laura Sarelle* also permeates Bowen's supernatural short horror fiction.