

Valerie O'Brien, "A Genius for Unreality': Neurodiversity in Elizabeth Bowen's *Eva Trout*." *Journal of Modern Literature* 42.2 (Winter 2019): 75-93.

Valerie O'Brien's article offers new insights into the mind of Elizabeth Bowen's eponymous heroine Eva, whose character has been subject to ongoing debate. Although literary critics have often described the character of Eva as opaque, inexplicable, or flat because of her non-normative behaviour, O'Brien argues that from a literary cognitive point of view, Eva's neurodivergent behaviour and sensory relation to the world, in fact, gestures towards a complex interiority.

In her article, which consists of five well-balanced sections with enticing titles, O'Brien places Bowen's novel in light of the 1960s anti-psychiatry movement and a twenty-first-century understanding of neurodiversity. Rather than providing a tedious account of the history of the study of neurodiversity, O'Brien skilfully weaves examples of historical context and theory into her close-reading of Bowen's text. For instance, she reads Bowen's depiction of Eva's apparent linguistic inaptitude in light of R. D. Liang's *The Divided Self* (1969), which critiques the prevailing psychiatric jargon and offers an alternative to the standard psychiatric practice of "see[ing] [the patient's] behavior as 'signs' of a 'disease'" by posing that "one may see his behaviour as expressive of his existence" (Liang 31). In line with Liang's observations, O'Brien finds that, instead of unthinking and detached, the character of Eva may be characterized as creative, emotional, and imaginatively attached to the world.

Building on the works by Orisini and Davidson, Jaarsma and Welin, and Kathleen Seidel, O'Brien conceptualizes neurodiversity as an alternative way of interacting with the world that is in no way superior or inferior to neurotypicality. Following this approach, she suggests that neurodivergence provides a context for understanding Eva's atypicality as the result of cognitive difference. Bowen's depictions of Eva's preference for the visual over the linguistic, reluctance to make eye contact, heightened sensitivity to sound, and tendency to shout when overexcited, might therefore imply that Eva may be developmentally non-normative rather than eccentric. This argument is substantiated with a number of convincing examples from the novel. O'Brien, for instance, outlines passages in which Eva's discomfort with language becomes apparent through Bowen's descriptions of her inability "to speak talk, be understood, converse" (Bowen, 62), and exemplifies how this behaviour emphasizes her neurodivergence, rather than her apparent dullness.

Whereas the intersection between neuroscience and literature has been a growing field in interdisciplinary studies, comparatively few critics have read *Eva Trout* in the context of disability and cognitive literary studies. Whereas Maren Linett, for instance, recently discussed the role of disability in Bowen's work, this analysis pertains only to the character of Jeremy, Eva's son, and his deafness. O'Brien's study of Eva in light of neurodiversity, a broad category that also includes autism and presents a framework for the understanding of cognitive difference, is thus highly innovative, and a very welcome and unique contribution to the study of Bowen's work. Although O'Brien's interdisciplinary method runs the risk of being overly diagnostic, fortunately her study is not. Instead of reading the novel through a lens of contemporary psychology, it suggests that the assumptions that govern characters' responses to Eva can be explored through both the psychiatric languages of the 1960s and contemporary

discourses of neurodiversity. This opens up the field to a variety of new ways in which Bowen's work, as well as other twentieth-century narratives, can be examined. Combining the study of neuroscience and literature, therefore, can provide new insights into, not only the complexity involved in creating the minds of fictional characters in light of neurodiversity, but reciprocally also the different ways in which neurodivergence was perceived and treated in the 1960s.

A natural question that follows from O'Brien's analysis, is why Bowen would have depicted Eva in this fashion, and how this portrayal relates to other characters in the novel. Luckily, the article provides a very thoroughly-researched and detailed explanation in the second half of her article, in which she relates the content of the novel to Bowen's 1956 essay "How to Be Yourself—But Not Eccentric" and compares the neurodivergent character of Eva to that of the very unhappy and "dead" character of Eva's neurotypical English teacher Iseult. From this successful comparison, O'Brien concludes that Bowen advocates the cultivation of imaginative faculties and frames Eva's difference as a form of "genius" (84) in contrast to Iseult's "lack of feeling and connection" (86). In her portrait of Eva, O'Brien demonstrates that Bowen offers an intricate and sympathetic depiction of neurodiversity that conveys the heroine's humanity through her difference, and convincingly invites the reader to reassess such divergence from norms.

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