

The Symbolic Effect of the Scene in *The Death of the Heart*

—Elizabeth Bowen's Preoccupation with the Visible World—

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At the end of the preceding paper, the writer suggested that she would deal with Elizabeth Bowen's description of the material background—season, weather, landscape, houses, furniture, etc.—which gives a tension to the characters and produces an atmosphere peculiar to herself and to no other.

In this paper, *The Death of the Heart*, one of her most successful novels before the war, has been taken up to discuss the problem, because it most perfectly and dynamically represents her theme and technique which has been repeated from the beginning of her story-writing.

The Death of the Heart consists of three parts, 'The World', 'The Flesh' and 'The Devil', in each of which she deliberately sets up the background, paints it with rich colours and makes effective use of lighting which reminds us of the pictures of French Impressionists.

She is sometimes condemned as having a tendency to describe too much in detail the things which appear outwardly trivial. At our first reading, indeed, most of them are overlooked or rather felt unnecessary, but when we read again, they stimulate us to think of their meaning and value in connection with the plot and character. To begin with, she carefully plans the background, and then arranges the characters; there is such a close relationship that the characters are unable to exist apart from the background.

She thinks very highly of the plot¹⁾ or the story as a traditional English novelist, but what makes her writing most impressive is not the plot itself. Here comes the importance of the scene, in its wider sense, in her novels; it suggests and leads to what is going to happen next or what the characters are feeling in such a situation.

1) Elizabeth Bowen, *Collected Impressions*, New York, Knopf, 1950, p. 249.

She says in her *Notes on Writing a Novel*:²⁾

SCENE—Is a derivative Plot. Gives actuality to Plot.

Nothing can happen nowhere. The locale of the happening always colours the happening, and often to a degree, shapes it.

Plot having pre-decided what is to happen, scene, scenes, must be so found, so chosen, as to give the happening the desired force.

Scene, being physical, is, like the physical traits of the characters, generally a copy, or a composite copy.....Almost anything drawn from 'real life'—house, town, room, park, landscape—will almost certainly be found to require some distortion for the purposes of the plot. Remote memories, already distorted by the imagination, are most useful for the purposes of scene.....

Scene, much more than character, is inside the novelist's conscious power. More than any other constituent of the novel, it makes him conscious of his power.

She is, of course, conscious of the danger of depending too much on the scene and refers to Jane Austen's economy of scene-painting. Then she adds,

Scene is only justified in the novel where it can be shown, or at least felt, to act upon action or character. In fact, where it has dramatic use.

I. The Dramatic Usage of Opening Scenes

In this novel, she begins each part with an impressive scene which foreshadows the story that follows. The opening paragraphs of the first third of the novel is especially symbolic, because it is not only the prelude of that Part, but also the keynote of the whole story :

That morning's ice, no more than a brittle film, had cracked and was now floating in segments. These tapped together or, parting, left channels of dark water, down which swans in slow indignation swam. The islands stood in frozen woody brown dusk: it was now between three and four in the afternoon. A sort of breath from the clay, from the city outside the park, condensing, made the air unclear; through this, the trees round the lake soared frigidly up. Bronze cold of January bound the sky and the landscape; the sky was shut to the sun—but the swans, the rims of the ice, the pallid withdrawn Regency terraces had an unnatural

2) *Ibid.*, pp. 253—254.

burnish, as though cold were light. There is something momentous about the height of winter. Steps rang on the bridges, and along the black walks. This weather had set in; it would freeze harder tonight.

On a footbridge between an island and the mainland a man and woman stood talking, leaning on the rail. In the intense cold, which made everyone hurry, they had chosen to make this long summerlike pause. Their oblivious stillness made them look like lovers—actually, their elbows were some inches apart; they were riveted not to each other but to what she said. Their thick coats made their figures sexless and stiff as chessmen; they were well-to-do, inside bulwarks of fur and cloth their bodies generated a steady warmth; they could only see the cold—or, if they felt it, they only felt it at their extremities. Now and then he stamped on the bridge, or she brought her muff up to her face. Ice pushed down the channel under the bridge, so that while they talked their reflections were constantly broken up. (pp. 9—10)³⁾

Here, the cinematoic representation attracts our attention at first, but as W. Heath has pointed out,⁴⁾ the verbal description is far more selective, and allows the writer to sort out and merge impressions and senses for his own purpose. Ice 'no more than a brittle film' means the loveless Quayne home, and swan 'in slow indignation' symbolizes Portia (the swan image will be dealt with later on page 19). The 'bronze cold of January', suggestive of both brilliance and coldness, gives everything in this scene 'an unnatural burnish.' And the unnaturalness is found in the man and woman (St. Quentin and Anna) who 'stood talking, leaning on the rail, in the intense cold.' The 'summer-like pause' of two figures who look like lovers, though they are apart and their figures are sexless, is a kind of paradox here. Such paradoxical presentation of the scene appears again at the end of the novel where 'an intimation of summer coming' seems to indicate an optimistic sign with 'its heat and glare', but behind it, we feel the cold and suffocating atmosphere of Windsor Terrace where Portia has to come back again.

The most important thing is that the details have no previous context to define them, and yet their meaning is immediately clear in their rich associations in which scene, season and characters are interwoven.

3) Page numbers after the quotations refer to *The Death of the Heart* by Elizabeth Bowen, Jonathan Cape Edition, London, 1952.

4) William Heath, *Elizabeth Bowen*, The Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1961, p. 154.

Part 2 opens with a description full of colours, warmth, freedom and vitality of early March which is quite different from the frozen and dark atmosphere of Part 1. 'The curtain of darkness' which is 'suspended' and 'the window being thrown open' symbolizes the release from winter. And 'the traffic' which 'lightenes and quickens' represents the vitality and animation of the season :

Early in March the crocuses crept alight, then blazed yellow and purple in the park. The whistle was blown later: it was possible to walk there after tea. In fact, it is about five o'clock in an evening that the first hour of spring strikes—autumn arrives in the early morning, but spring at the close of a winter day. The air, about to darken, quickens and is run through with mysterious white light; the curtain of darkness is suspended, as though for some unprecedented event. There is perhaps no sunset, the trees are not yet budding—but the senses receive an intimation, an intimation so fine, yet striking in so directly, that this appears a movement in one's own spirit. This exalts whatever feeling is in the heart.

No moment in human experience approaches in its intensity this experience of the solitary earth's. The later phases of spring, when her foot is in at the door, are met with a conventional gaiety. But her first unavowed presence is disconcerting; silences fall in company—the wish to be either alone or with a lover is avowed by some look or some spontaneous movement—the window being thrown open, the glance away up the street. In cities the traffic lightens and quickens; even buildings take such feeling of depth that the streets might be rides cut through a wood. What is happening is only acknowledged between strangers, by looks, or between lovers. Unwritten poetry twists the hearts of people in their thirties. To the person out walking that first evening of spring, nothing appears inanimate, nothing not sentient: darkening chimneys, viaducts, villas, glass-and-steel factories, chain stores seem to strike as deep as natural rocks, seem not only to exist but to dream. Atoms of light quiver between the branches of stretching-up black trees. It is in this unearthly first hour of spring twilight that earth's almost agonised livingness is most felt. This hour is so dreadful to some people that they hurry indoors and turn out the lights—they are pursued by the scent of violets sold on the kerb.

On that early March evening, Anna and Portia both, though not together, happend to be walking in Regent's Park. This was Portia's first spring in England: very young people are true but not resounding instruments. Their senses are tuned to the earth, like the senses of animals; they feel, but without conflict or pain. Portia was not like Anna, already half way though a woman's checked, puzzled life, a life to which the intelligence only gives a further distorted pattern. With Anna, feeling was by now unwilling, but she had more resonance. Memory

enlarged and enlarged inside her an echoing, not often visited cave. Anna could remember being a child more easily and with more pleasure than she could remember being Portia's age: with her middle teens a cloudy phase had begun. She did not know half she remembered till a sensation touched her; she forgot to look back till these first evening of spring.

At different moments, they both crossed different bridges over the lake, and saw swans folded, dark white ciphers on the white water, in an immortal dream. They both viewed the Cytherean twisting reaches at the ends of the lake, both looked up and saw pigeons cluttering the transparent trees. They saw crocuses staining the dusk purple or yellow, flames with no power. They heard silence, then horns, cries, an oar on the lake, silence striking again, the thrush fluting so beautifully. Anna kept pausing, then walking quickly past the couples against the railings: walking alone in her elegant black she drew glances; she went to watch the dogs coursing in the empty heart of the park. But Portia almost ran, with her joy in her own charge, like a child bowling a hoop. (pp. 148—150)

The scene is the same with the opening of Part 1. But the time of the year is different and the scene symbolizes the change of mood in Portia, who found a friend and 'accomplice' in the form of Eddie. Though both Anna and Portia are in Regend Park, they are not together, and there is a contrast between them—'Anna kept pausing', and 'Portia almost ran, with her joy in her own charge' with the approaching spring. Here we call to mind again what Bowen says, "The same scene can, by means of a series of presentations, each having freshness, be made to ripen, mature, actually advance".⁵⁾ The dramatic usage of the scene is a proof of her having an acute awareness of the visible world, together with her insight into the development of plot and the situation of characters.

The opening part of the last third of the novel is indicative of the lifeless and heavy atmosphere of Windsor Terrace:

Thomas and Anna would not be back from abroad till Friday afternoon.

Everything was ready for them to come back and live. That Friday morning, 2 Windsor Terrace was lanced through by dazzling spokes of sun, which moved unseen, hotly, over the waxed floors. Vacantly over-looking the bright lake, chestnuts in leaf, the house offered that ideal mould for living into which life so seldom pours itself. The clocks, set and wound, ticked

5) E. Bowen, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

the hours away in immaculate emptiness. Portia—softly opening door after door, looking all round rooms with her reflecting dark eyes, glancing at each clock, eyeing each telephone—did not count as a presence.

The spring cleaning had been thorough. Each washed and polished object stood roundly in the unseeing air. The marbles glittered like white sugar; the ivory paint was smoother than ivory. Blue spirit had removed the winter film from the mirrors: now their jet-sharp reflections hurt the eye; they seemed to contain reality. The veneers of cabinets blazed with chestnut light. Upstairs and downstairs, everything smelt of polish; a clean soapy smell came out from behind books. Crisp from the laundry, the inner net curtains stirred over windows reluctantly left open to let in the April air with its faint surcharge of soot. Yes, already, with every breath that passed through the house, pollution was beginning. (pp. 276—277)

Everything in the house is washed and polished, and the words ‘dazzling’, ‘glitter’, ‘blaze’ etc. suggest the perfect cleanliness of the house. The April air, however, comes into the room with ‘its faint surcharge of soot’, and ‘pollution’ is brought ‘with every breath that passed through the house’. What brings ‘pollution’ in Portia’s heart is the devil which appears in various attires—sometimes in the form of Eddie, sometimes of Anna, etc.

II. The Effect of Background on Characters

She is skilled in describing the atmosphere of evening when the inside is not completely dark and the silhouette of persons or things can be detected in the dusk.

The following passage shows the Regency buildings which stand like ‘colourless silhouettes’ against the sky in the dusk:

...it was just before lighting-up time—quite soon the All Out whistles would sound. At the far side of the road, dusk set the Regency buildings back at a false distance: against the sky they were colourless silhouettes, insipidly ornate, brittle and cold. The blackness of windows not yet lit or curtained made the house look hollow inside. (pp. 15—16)

The word ‘brittle’ which modifies the buildings, reminds us of the ‘ice’ in the first paragraph of this novel quoted on page 2. And the ‘hollowness’ inside suggests the atmosphere of the Regency Terrace where Portia has to live with Thomas, her half-brother, and Anna, his wife. The dusk gives us the feeling of uneasiness and loneliness,

as it loses the brightness of daylight and has not yet gained the calmness of night. Even the same thing looks different in the dusk, and Bowen seems to love the atmosphere evoked by it.

The emptiness and tension of the room when Anna and St. Quentin come in is described as follows :

When Anna with St. Quentin on her heels, came into the drawing-room it appeared to be empty—then by the light of one distant lamp and the fire they perceived Portia, sitting on a stool. Her dark dress almost blotted her out against a dark lacquer screen—but now she rose up politely, to shake hands with St. Quentin..... ‘Goodness!’ said Anna, glancing at the tea-tray set inexorably with three cups. She switched on all the other lamps, dropped her muff in a chair, In the pretty air-tight room with its drawn acquamarine curtains, scrolled sofa and half-circle of yellow chairs, silk-shaded lamps cast light into the mirrors and on to Samarkand rugs...By sitting like this, he exaggerated the tension they had found in the room, outside which he consciously placed himself. (pp. 32—33)

The room was dark because Portia lighted only one distant lamp and Anna did not detect her presence until she rose up. Anna has been uneasy having read Portia’s diary, and Portia knew that Anna had entered her room while she was away, though not knowing yet of the fact that her diary had been read. There was an atmosphere of their not being able to trust each other, and Anna switched on all the other lamps as if she did not like the darkness because of her guilty conscience. Portia has been longing for the ordinary and warm family life, but the life in Windsor Terrace was that of unnaturalness.

‘Silhouette’ is often found in Bowen’s description of the background not only in this novel but also in other works. In *Joining Charles* for example, Bowen relates young Mrs. Charles’s apprehension before she gets up to be ready for the trip, emphasizing her fear at night with ‘the objects round her, which till now had been uncertain, wavering silhouettes in candlelight.’⁶⁾ Bowen seems to be conscious of its power of causing an uncertain feeling in one’s mind.

Between Portia and the housekeeper Matchett, who has been her only sympathizer

6) Elizabeth Bowen, *Joining Charles and Other Stories*, Jonathan Cape, 1952, p. 12.

in Windsor Terrace, there is a secret understanding :

It was half-past ten at night. Matchett opening Portia's door an inch, breathed cautiously through the crack : a line of light from the landing ran across the darkness into the room.... Portia instinctively spoke low after dark : she was accustomed to thin walls. She watched the door shut, saw the bend of light cut off, and heard Matchett crossing the floor with voluminous quietness. As always, Matchett went to the window and drew the curtains open—false faint day began again, tawny as though London were burning. Now and then cars curved past. The silence of a shut park does not sound like country silence : it is tense and confined. In the intricate half darkness inside Portia's room the furniture could be seen, and Matchett's apron—phosphorescent, close up as she sat down on the bed. (pp. 88—89)

There is a domineering impression in Matchett's behavior and Portia is timid in her presence. But she feels there is some unseen tie between them, as she looks at Matchett's figure reflected against the window in the mysterious darkness. Portia seems to like the dusk better than brightness, in which she feels her heart more at home.

Bowen often uses the word 'tension' (cf. the quotation on page 3) in regards to the atmosphere of the room which at the same time suggests the distress of human relationship.

In the following passage, there is a seemingly happy atmosphere in the behaviour of Thomas, Anna and Portia, such as seen in the fireside circle of an ordinary family :

Anna sat on the sofa with her pretty feet up, Thomas nosing so kindly round for cigars, Portia nursing her elbows as though they had been a couple of loved cats—here was the focus of the necessary dream...But in this darkening light of Saturday afternoon, loneliness lay on his study like a cloud. The tumbled papers, the ash, the empty coffee-cup made Pidgeon's successor look untriumphant, as though he had never held any prize. Even the fire only grinned, like a fire in an advertisement. Major Brutt, whose thought could puzzle out nothing, had, in regard to people, a sort of sense of the weather. He was aware of the tension behind Thomas's head. Without nerves, Brutt had those apprehensions that will make an animal suddenly leave, or refuse to enter, a room. (p. 112)

But underneath it, solitude broods over each of them, and even the fire is described with the verb 'grin' which suggests personified uncanniness and heightens the tense atmosphere of the room and the people, making Anna's innocent friend feel uneasy.

The art of personification is often used by Bowen to emphasize the mysterious and weird atmosphere of the material background, where emptiness and uneasiness prevails. In *The Heat of the Day*, too, 'fire' is personified with such phrases as 'hot set lips' and 'grinned away' and gives them (Stella and her son Roderick) the feeling of isolation in the tense and weird atmosphere of the room :

There was not much left for either of them to say, and in this room in which they sat nothing spoke, either—a mysterious flutter, like that of a fire burning, which used to emanate from the minutes seemed to be at a stop. The actual fire's electric elements, vertical hot set lips, grinned away at the empty end of the room.....the room, sealed up in its artificial light, remained exaggerated and cerebral.⁷⁾

In Part 1, dusk gives an uneasy or uncanny feeling, while in Part 2, it is differently represented :

Though dusk already fell on the esplanade, the room held a light reflection from the sea. She located the smell of spring with a trough of blue hyacinths, just come into flower. Almost all one side of the room was made up of french windows, which gave on to the sun porch but were at present shut...At one end of the room, an extravagant fire fluttered on brown glazed tiles; the wireless cabinet was the most glossy of all. Opposite the windows a glass-fronted bookcase, full but with a remarkably locked look, chiefly served to reflect the marine view. A dark blue chenille curtain, faded in lighter streaks, muffled an arch that might lead to the stairs. In other parts of the room, Portia's humble glances discovered such objects as a scarlet portable gramophone.....Portia ate doughnuts, shortbread and Dundee cake and gazed past Mrs. Heccomb at the vanishing sea. She thought how gay this room, with its lights on, must look from the esplanade, thought how dark it was out there, and came to envy herself. (pp. 161—163)

It seemed that dusk does not give the people uneasiness or tension, here in Waiki, because there is a light reflection from the sea which gives various glazes to the room and everything is filled with vitality, with no shadow at all. Portia is inclined to feel frank and easy in such an atmosphere, and realizes a new life has begun with the electric light in her room which seems to make her gay by its frankness unknown at

7) Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, Jonathan Cape, 1949, pp. 52—53.

Windsor Terrace (cf. p. 164).

And again in Part 3, dusk is described as follows:

The evening became more gloomy and overcast. Clouds made a steely premature dusk, and made the trees out in the park metallic. Anna had had the candles lit for dinner, but, because it should still be light, the curtains were not drawn. The big shell of columbines on the table looked theatrical in a livid way: out there on the lake the people went on rowing.... Just after the duck came in, the dining-room telephone started ringing. They let it ring for some seconds while they looked at each other. (p. 365)

Thomas, Anna and St. Quentin are waiting for Portia's return with anxieties because they know that she has already become aware of her diary having been read by Anna. When we feel guilty of what has happened without knowing what will become of it, we cannot help thinking of the worst result that might come upon us, and the evening dusk makes us feel more and more uneasy. Though they are now at dinner table, there is a dark and gloomy atmosphere, and the adjectives 'steely' 'metallic' 'livid', etc., suggest that cold air prevailing over Windsor Terrace.

Bowen is also keenly aware of the change of the weather. The following quotation shows the cloak room which, changes according to the weather or the season:

The cloakroom which had a stained-glass window smelt of a fog and Vinolia, the billiard (or school) room of carpet, radiators and fog—this room had no windows: a big domed skylight told the state of the weather, went leaden with fog, crepitated when it was raining, or dropped a great square glare on to the table when the sun shone. At the end of the afternoon, in winter, a blue-black glazed blind was run across from a roller to cover the skylight, when the electric lights had been turned on. Ventilation was not the room's strong point—which may have been why Portia drooped like a plant the moment she got in. She was not a success here, for she failed to concentrate, or even to seem to concentrate like the other girls. She could not keep her thoughts at face-and-table level; they would go soaring up through the glass dome. One professor would stop, glare and drum the edge of the table; another would say: 'Miss Quayne, please, *please*. Are we here to look at the sky?' For sometimes her inattention reached the point of bad manners, or, which was worse, began to distract the others. (pp. 64—65)

Portia is not a brilliant girl at Miss Paulie's class, and when she gets in this room,

she feels herself dejected, surrounded by the wall with no windows except a single stained-glass window. This reminds us of Stella's flat in *The Heat of the Day*, where 'Sensitive whitish walls registered every change in the mood of the London weather.' The delicate change of weather also has some effect on the sensitive mind in her works.

Bowen excels in describing the beauty of landscape, but unlike Katherine Mansfield, who draws it for its own sake, she gives it a latent meaning and attaches great importance to its connection with hearts of the people.

The following quotation is the first passage of viii in Part 2, and is an appropriate prelude to the lyrical description that follows :

They walked inland, uphill, to the woods behind the station—the ridge of the woods she had seen from the top of the sea wall. That Sunday, when she had been looking forward to Eddie, woods have played no part in the landscape she saw in her heart..... Thickets of hazel gauzed over the distances inside; holes of trees rose rounded out of the thickets into the spring air. Light, washing the stretching branches, sifted into the thickets, making a small green flame of every early leaf. Unfluting in the arm-pit warmth of the valley, leaves were still timid, humid: in the uphill woods spring still only touched the boughs in a green mist that ran into the sky. (p. 254)

Portia feels the tender delight of early spring because she is now with Eddie; she could not find the beauty of the woods, trees, and the green flame of every leaf, when she was only looking forward to Eddie. The description is suggestive of the rhythm of Portia's heart here.

Following uphill dog paths, parting hazels, crossing thickets upright, they reached the ridge of the woods. From here, they could see out. The sun, striking down the slope trees, glittered over the film of green-white buds: a gummy smell was drawn out in the warm afternoon haze. To the south, the chalk-blue sea, to the north, the bare smooth down: they saw, too, the gleam of the railway line. In spirit, the two of them rose to the top of life like bubbles. Eddie drew her arm through his; Portia leaned her head on his shoulder and stood in the sun by him with her eyes shut. (p. 262)

The above passage is also full of sun, light, colour, smell and joy of the open air which is very different from the atmosphere of Parts 1 and 3. Portia looks happy with

her head on Eddie's shoulder, but the word 'bubbles' suggests their happiness may not last because of its evanescence.

Covent Garden where Eddie is going to meet Portia is described as follows:

Covent Garden just after six o'clock, with its shuttered arcades, was not gay. Across the façades, like a theatre set shabby in daylight, and across the barren glaring spaces, films of shade were steadily coldly drawn, as though there were some nervous tide in the sky. Here and there, bits of paper did not blow about but sluggishly twitched. The place gave out a look of hollow desuetude, as though its desertion would last for ever. London is full of such deserts, of such moments, at which the mirage of one's own keyed-up existence suddenly fails. Covent Garden acted as a dissolvent on Eddie: he walked round like a cat. (p. 329)

Eddie does not think Covent Garden a good place to meet, but he had no time to think of anywhere else. It has 'a look of desuetude' which acts on his mind and makes him feel deserted and vacant too. Here, Covent Garden is compared to the substance which has the power of dissolving Eddie's feeling. The landscape in Bowen's works is often described not as a static picture, but as an existence having some active and vital power upon the mind of characters.

Towards the end of this novel, Bowen uses the word 'landscape' in a figurative sense:

One's sentiments—called them that—one's fidelities are so instinctive that one hardly knows they exist: only when they are betrayed or, worse still, when one betrays them does one realise their power. That betrayal is the end of an inner life, without which the everyday becomes threatening or meaningless. At the back of the spirit a mysterious landscape, whose perspective used to be infinite, suddenly perishes: this is like being cut off from the country forever, not even meeting its breath down the city street. (pp. 359—360)

What Bowen really means by the phrase 'mysterious landscape' is a little ambiguous here, but we feel its link with the words—sentiments, fidelities, inner life, etc. And the 'betrayal' of one's sentiments leads to the annihilation of 'mysterious landscape', in other words the death of the heart.

III. Symbols and Characters

So far, it has been explained that the background in Bowen's works plays an

important part in the representation of the characters' state of mind. The background here refers to rather a vague and indirect atmosphere as a whole.

In the following, more concrete things, such as furniture, houses, flowers, swans, puzzles, etc., will be presented as they seem to have a symbolic force on the characters.

(A) Furniture, house

There exists a strange intimacy between Matchett and the furniture. Having no family, she clings to it as a mother to her only child :

'...The things that came to them here from Mrs. Quayne's were accustomed to the best care; Mrs. Thomas knew they must have it. Oh, it is lovely furniture, and Mr. and Mrs. Thomas see the value of it. ...You can see ten foot into my polish, and Mrs. Thomas likes the look of a thing.' 'But what made you come here?' 'It seemed to me proper. I hadn't the heart, either, to let that furniture go: I wouldn't have known myself. It was that that kept me at Mrs. Quayne's. I was sorry to leave those marbles I'd got so nice, but those had to stop and I put them out of my mind.' 'The furniture would have missed you?' 'Furniture's knowing all right. Not much gets past the things in a room, I daresay, and chairs and tables don't go to the grave so soon. Every time I take the soft cloth to that stuff in the drawing-room, I could say, "Well, you know a bit more." My goodness, when I got here and saw all Mrs. Quayne's stuff where Mrs. Thomas had put it—if I'd have been a silly, I should have said it gave me quite a look. Well, it didn't speak, and I didn't. If Mr. and Mrs. Thomas are what you say, nervous, no doubt they are nervous of what's not said. I would not be the one to blame them: they live the best way they can. Unnatural living runs in a family, and the furniture knows it, you be sure. Good furniture knows what. It knows it's made for a purpose, and it respects itself—when I say *you're* made for a purpose you start off crying. Oh, furniture like we've got is too much for some that would rather not have the past. If I just had to look at it and have it looking at me, I'd go jumpy, I daresay. But when it's your work it can't do anything to you. Why, that furniture—I've been at it years and years with the soft cloth: I know it like my own face.....Oh yes, I notice them all right. But I'm not the one to speak: I've got no time. When they made a place for it, they made a place for me, and they soon saw nothing would come of *that*.' (pp. 98—99)

Here, Matchett's love for furniture is expressed as if it were no longer a lifeless, motionless thing but her most intimate and reliable friend with whom she cannot part. She usually does not like to speak much, as furniture do not, but here she speaks

a great deal to Portia of her attachment to the furniture. The furniture in Windsor Terrace has such a mysterious and appealing power that Matchett cannot help thinking it is a part of her life itself. The furniture symbolizes Matchett's respect for habit and tradition, which, at the same time, shows her contempt towards Thomas and Anna, who make little of such conception as habit or tradition. But Anna perceives a kind of obsession in Matchett's attitude and harbours an ill feeling towards her, because her tenacity for the furniture seems to represent her secret connection with Portia.

Anna speaks impatiently as follows :

'They (i. e. Portia and Matchett) sometimes look like each other. What other subject—except of course, love—gives people that sort of obsessed look? Talk like that is one climax the whole time. It's a trance; it's a vice; it's a sort of complete world. Portia may have defaulted lately because of Eddie. But Matchett will never let that drop; it's her *raison d'être*, apart from the furniture. And she is least likely of all to let it drop with Portia about the house. Portia's coming here was a consummation, you see.'

'Consummation my aunt. Has this really been going on? If I'd had any idea, I'd have fired Matchett at once.'

'You know quite well Matchett stays with the furniture. No, you inherited the whole bag of tricks. Matchett thinks the world of your father. Why shouldn't Portia hear about her father from someone who sees him as *someone*, not just as a poor ignominious old man?'

'I don't think you need say that.'

'I've never said it before...Yes, St. Quentin: it's Matchett she talks to chiefly.'

'Matchett—is that the woman with the big stony apron, who backs to the wall when I pass like a caryatid? She's generally on the stairs.' (p. 376)

Another symbol which characterizes Matchett is her apron, which is also found in the above passage. 'With the big stony apron' is the novelist St. Quentin's first impression of Matchett. Let us give one more example :

She had had her way like a fury. Tensed on the knitting needles (for she could not even relax without some expense of energy) her fingers were bleached and their skin puckered, like the skin of old apples, from unremitting immersion in hot water, soda, soap. Her nails were pallid, fibrous, their tips split. Light crept down the sooty rockery, through the bars of the window, to find no colour in Matchett: her dark blue dress blotted the light up. She looked built back into the half darkness behind her apron's harsh glaze. In her helmet of stern hair, a

few white threads shone—but behind the opaqueness of her features control permitted no sag of tiredness. There was more than control here: she wore the look of someone who has augustly fulfilled herself. Floor by floor over the basement toward her speckless house, and a reckoning consciousness of it showed like eyes through the eyelids she lowered over her knitting. (pp. 278—279)

Though it is twelve noon, and light creeps into Matchett's basement parlour through the bars of the window, her figure looks obscure because of its dark blue dress. And her 'apron's harsh glaze' seems to be her armour protecting her from the outer world with which she would like to have no connection, except with Portia. There are other descriptions concerning her apron, such as 'There were moments when this correctness *behind her apron*, cut both ways (p. 51) / Portia had unconsciously pushed, while she spoke, at the knee *under Matchett's apron* as though she were trying to push away a wall (p. 96).

One more thing in which she feels pride is 'her speckless house', which is also quoted in the above passage.

There is a great difference between the attitudes of Eddie and Matchett towards the furniture and the room. Unlike Matchett, Eddie has 'a contempt for natty contrivances':

The room, unaired and chilly, smelled of this morning's breakfast, last night's smoke.... If he had stuffed a bunch of flowers (never very nice flowers) into his one art vase, the concession always seemed touching. This was not all that was touching: the smells of carpet and ash, of dust inside the books and the stagnant tea had a sort of unhopeful acquiescence about them...he had a contempt for natty contrivances, and he did sincerely associate pretty living with being richer than he could hope to be. To the hideous hired furniture and the stuffiness he did (with a kind of arrogance) acquiesce. Thus he kept the right, which he used to, to look round his friends' room—at the taste, the freshness, the ingenuity—with a cold marvelling alien ironic eye. (pp. 334—335)

Being unaired, his room is filled with various smells which suggest his coldness and contempt towards settled ordinary life. And such an attitude seems to be one of the causes of Matchett's antipathy towards Eddie.

A 'speckless house' is an ideal of Matchett's life, but Portia feels that the house

she lives in is something that has an oppressive power upon her. Hence in her diary, figurative expressions such as 'perfect web' and 'ghost' are used concerning the house :

'...You know that house is a perfect web'...Her diary, fetched from Windsor Terrace, lay still untouched between their elbows, with a strong rubber band round it. (p. 119)

I went down to her for tea, she said, well, you're quite a ghost. But really it is this house that is like that. (p. 139)

Though they have different feelings towards a house, there is a coincidence between them in that it is not a lifeless object, but a thing that has some active and living power on the people.

(B) Flowers

Flowers also are used to express a peculiar relationship with the characters who look at them in some special situations.

When Thomas and Anna came back from abroad, she found a florist's gilt box on the chair (there was no room for it on the laden table. Asking Portia to open those flowers and tell her who they were from, she went up to have a bath. Five minutes later, Portia came to tap on the bathroom door. The following is the dialogue between Anna and Portia :

...'Oh hullo?' she said. 'Well?'

'They are carnations.'

'What colour?'

'Sort of quite bright pink.'

'Oh God—who are they from?'

'Major Brutt. He says on the card that they are to welcome you home.'

'This would happen,' Anna said. 'They must have cost him the earth; he probably didn't have lunch and this makes me hysterical.....You had better take them down and show them to Thomas. Or else give them to Matchett; they might do for her room. I know this dreadful, but I feel so unreal...Then you might write Major Brutt a note. Say I have gone to bed. I am sure he would much rather have a note from you. Oh, how was Eddie? I see he rang up.'

'Matchett answered.'

'Oh! I thought you probably would. Well, Portia, let's have a talk later.' Anna shut the door and got into her bath. (p. 286)

Anna probably knows Major Brutt's ignorance in thinking that the bright pink carnation is the wrong colour, But she has such a delicate sensibility that she cannot bear the unrefined present from him. Though she always tries to conceal her real state of mind, her tone betrays her feeling, and here her latent contempt for Major Brutt is revealed in her short and fragmentary speech.

After tea, Thomas and Portia went into the park, and at the far side of the lake they found the tulips :

Here stood the tulips just ready to flower : still grey and pointed, but brilliantly veined with the crimsons, mauves, yellows they were to be. Late afternoon sunshine streamed into the faces of people sitting in deck chairs, along the lake or on the bright grass—shading their eyes or bending their heads down or letting the sun beat on their closed lids, these people sat like reddening stones.

.....Thomas and Portia turned their alike profiles in the direction from which the breeze came. Portia thought how inland the air smelled. Looking unmoved up at the turquoise sky above the trees burning thinly yellow-green, Thomas said he felt the weather would change.

'I hope not before these tulips are out. These are the tulips father told me about.'

'Tulips—what do you mean? When did he see them?'

'The day he walked past your house.'

'Did he walk past out house? When?'

'One day, once. He said it had been painted; it looked like marble, he said. He was very glad you lived there.'

Thomas's face went slowly set and heavy, as though he felt the weight of his father's solitary years as well as his own. (pp. 292—293)

Curiously, Thomas is almost as much a stranger in his own home as Portia, because of his isolation from Anna who had such a lover as Robert Pidgeon and yet married Thomas.

The beautiful tulips themselves have no special feeling or consciousness, but once the people have some recollection of them, they throw shadows upon them and evoke a tense atmosphere.

The following passage shows the uneasy feeling of Major Brutt who cannot understand why Anna looks nervous after he has told her about her former lover, his old friend Robert Pidgeon :

Fatalistically, she faced having got this out at last. She looked at herself in the glass with enormous calm. Major Brutt, meanwhile, turning his shoulder against the mantelpiece, investigated a boat-shaped glass of roses, whose scent had disturbed him for some time. Reverently, with the tip of a finger, he jabbed at the softness of the crimson petals, then bent over to sniff exhaustively. This rather tsagy, for him rather conscions, action showed he knew he stood where she might not wish him to stand—outside a shut door, a forgotten messenger for whom there might be an answer and might not. Perplexity, reverence, readiness to be sad or reliable showed in every line of his attitude. He would be glad to move, if she only gave him the word. It was not his habit to take notice of flowers, or of any small object in a room, and by giving the roses such undue attention, he placed himself in an uneasy relation to them. He jabbed once more and said: 'Do these come from the country?' 'Yes. And your nice carnations have just died.' (p. 317)

In his action of jabbing at the softness of the crimson petals of roses, he shows his perplexity, because it is not his habit to take notice of flowers. The atmosphere of the room is rather heavy and there is a feeling of oppression between Anna and Major Brutt. And the slience of crimson roses emphasizes the unnaturalness of Anna's life and thought. Though she has been displeased when she got his present of pink carnations, she keeps up appearances here, saying 'your nice carnations have just died...'

Eddie has a different attitude towards the flower from Major Brutt:

...Like the taste of many people whose extraction is humble, what taste he had lagged some decades back in time, and had an exciting, anti-moral colour. His animal suspiciousness, his bleakness, the underlying morality of his class, his expectation of some appalling contrempts which should make him have to decamp from everything suddenly were not catered for in his few expensive dreams—for there is a narrowness about fantasy: it figures only the *voulu* part of the self... For as things were, this room of his became a *tour de force*—not simply the living here...but the getting away with it, even making it pay...There were some dying red daisies in the vase, which showed he had had someone to tea last week.....

Eddie, with his race entirely stiff, picked up the forgotten dead daisies from the table, doubled their stalks up and put them precisely into the waste-paper basket. He looked all round the room, as though to see what else there was out of place; then his eyes, without changing, without a human flicker, with all their darkness of immutable trouble, returned to Portia's figure, where they stopped. (pp. 335—340)

The dead flowers in the vase are felt more desolate than if there had been no flowers at all. And the dialogue that follows (omitted in the above quotation) indicates Eddie's selfishness and Portia's disappointment. Especially, in Eddie's action of picking up the forgotten dead daisies from the table and doubling their stalks up and putting them into the wastepaper basket, Portia detects his secret betrayal.

(C) Swan

The Swan is a bird treated often in legend, music, painting, etc. from old times. And in Irish tradition there seems to be some particular feeling concerning swans. G. Melchiori says,⁸⁾ "Yeates had been impressed by the old Irish legend of the children of Lir transformed into swans'. In his early poetry appears the image of the singing swans in the atmosphere of Irish twilight, and later "the idea of the annunciation of a new cult, or a new civilization" is included in the swan image.

In this novel, as W. Heath says,⁹⁾ the swan is used as a symbol of 'romanticism and innocence'.

In the first passage, already quoted on page 2, 'swans in slow indignation' are seen swimming down 'channels of dark water'. The phrase seems to suggest Portia's loneliness, sorrow and exasperation which the adult people would not understand. The swans, isolated in the coldness, alludes to Portia's situation in Windsor Terrace.

In the following, St. Quentin, looked at a swan, has the impression of being watched by Portia in whom he feels a little monster:

Drumming with stiff, gloved fingers on the bridge rail, he frowned down at a swan till it vanished under bridge. His eyes, like the swan's were set rather near in. He broke out: 'Fancy her watching me'. What a little monster she must be. (p. 15)

In Portia's diary, it is written that she watched the swans which 'kept their heads turned away from each other'. She has some anxieties about Eddie because she feels she is getting further and further away from Eddie, and is not sure when she will be able to see him again:

Today I stood on a canal bridge, another canal bridge that we never stood on. I watched the swans, they sailed under the bridge. They say the swans are nesting, but these two kept

8) Giorgio Melchiori: *The Whole Mystery of Art*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1960, p. 99.

9) William Heath, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 154.

their head turned away from each other. Today it is not raining but quite dark, black is all through the air though the green make me seem to be getting further and further away from the day I saw Eddie, not nearer and nearer the day I shall see him again. (p. 272)

Swan is not only described in the dark and frozen background, but also in the bright spring light :

Anna frowned. Eddie turned away and stood looking out of the window at the park. Shoulders squared, hands thrust in his pockets, he took the pose of a chap making a new start. Her aquamarine curtains, looped high up over his head with cords and tassels, fell in a stately folds each side of him to the floor, theatrically framing his back view. He saw the world at its most sheltered and gay ; it was, then, the spring of the year before ; the chestnuts opposite her window were in bud ; through the branches glittered the lake, with swans and one running dark pink sail ; the whole scene was varnished with spring light. Eddie brought one hand out of his pocket and pinched a heavy *moiré* fold of the curtain by which he stood. (p. 85)

‘a heavy *moiré* fold of the curtain’ seems to symbolize the darkness and coldness of Windsor Terrace and the ‘glittering lake with swans’ sailing serenely by despite the deception and turmoil within the house, makes a contrast with it, signifying their unapproachability.

In the opening passage of Part 2, quoted on page 6, swans are seen by Anna and Portia. Unlike in Part 1, they ‘folded, dark white ciphers on the white water, in immortal dream’. (as for the swan image, compare also, pp. 44, 97, 293.)

(D) Puzzle

Portia is sent a jigsaw puzzle, a monstrously large puzzle that takes days and weeks to work out, by Major Brutt who has come recently back from long army service that has kept him out of contact with English life and who, like Portia, is unsettled without occupation. She writes her joy in her diary as follows : ‘Oh, it is just like an answer to prayer, Major Brutt has sent me a jigsaw puzzle. I found it on the table when I came in. He says he would like to imagine me doing it.’ (p. 141). And her interest and attachment in the puzzle comes out repeatedly in her diary (cf. pp. 142, 143, 144). Her diary reflects the disordered state of her mind. She always attempts to make connections between what she sees and what she understands. And her efforts towards understanding are symbolized by the puzzle.

When she came to Waikiki, she at first felt herself quite out of place, having nothing to do, and wished she could have brought that puzzle :

Mrs. Heccomb was so much occupied with the lamp shade, Dickie by simply sitting and glooming there, that she wished she could have brought Major Brutt's puzzle—she could have been getting on with that. But you cannot pack a jigsaw that is three-quarters done. As it was, sitting under an alabaster pendant that poured a choked orange light on her head, she felt stupefied by this entirely new world. (p. 168)

After a while, Portia becomes well adjusted to the new life of Waikiki, but here she thinks of her favorite puzzle and then of the life in Windsor Terrace. It is not that she loves Windsor Terrace as her home, but that she recollects the things 'that at least her senses had loved'. What she unconsciously looked for was the idealized pattern of family life as she had had nothing of the sort, having lived in the 'sunless hotel room' with her parents before coming to Windsor Terrace. And in her working at the jigsaw puzzle, she wanted to find something that would answer her question—though what she seeks from life is what life can never give her. The puzzle reflects abstract, constructive activity, and the completion of a puzzle is a stage passed in Portia's development.

Major Brutt was kind enough to send her the second puzzle :

...and Portia worked at the puzzle at a table in the sun porch, with a diligence that helped to steady her nerves. It soon promised to represent a magnificent air display. That week was very sunny—her eyes dazzled as she fitted piece into piece, and a gull's shadow flashing over the puzzle would make her suddenly look up. The planes massing against an ultramarine sky began each to take a different symbolic form, and as she assembled the spectators she came to look for a threat or promise in each upturned face. (p. 220)

The puzzle appears repeatedly, sometimes to suggest her isolation and sometimes to indicate her immature way of thinking. And at last it is used to show why she went to Major Brutt's apartment house by herself after she felt betrayed by Eddie. When he visited Major Brutt, he did nothing but make her go home. He was, too, after all, a man of common sense and did not understand Portia's loneliness and distress. When she said, 'I've got nowhere to be', he answered, 'Come, that's nonsense you know'. She

has felt that Brutt and she has been the same, because she knew that he was ridiculed and mocked as she. Her innocence cannot tolerate his idealized view of the Quayne home, and she says,

‘You are the other person that Anna laughs at’, she went on, raising her eyes. ‘I don’t think you understand: Anna’s always laughing at you. She says you are quite pathetic. She laughed at your carnations being the wrong colour, then gave them to me. And Thomas always thinks you must be after something. Whatever you do, even send me a puzzle, he thinks that more, and she laughs more. They groan at each other when you have gone away. You and I are the same. (p. 348)

She had one hope that Brutt would understand her situation and sympathize with her—but in vain.

* * * * *

We have hitherto traced the description in which [Bowen’s peculiarities as a writer of sensibility are most vividly and impressively represented. She is not a sort of writer who can be called by the name of ‘great’, because the universe she created is not so wide and varied, and the characters she called into being are not so original and realistic as those of great novelists. But within her limitations, she has developed her talent and created a perfect world of her own. In other words, her limitations are the productive power of the intensity of her novels.

Most of the heroines in her novels are described as sufferers under their excessive sensibility. And they are always in a state of tension not only with other characters but also with the material background. Each detail of the background is described by Bowen’s acute awareness of visible world which is effective in evoking the intensive atmosphere peculiar to herself.

Of course, the real worth of E. Bowen as a novelist does not lie in her craft of describing the background or scene, however impressive it might be. But it is important because of its power upon the characters and of its symbolic effect on the whole story.