

Notes on *The Heat of the Day* by Elizabeth Bowen

— Symbloic meaning of season and time —

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In the previous paper, the writer dealt with Elizabeth Bowen's early short stories with an interest in her peculiar susceptibility to light and colour. At this time, her most famous novel, *The Heat of the Day* will be studied from the view point of the symbolic meaning season and time have in connection with the plot and characters.

Different from her short stories and early novels, in which we can hardly find such plots as Dickens or Austen contrived, *The Heat of the Day* has a plot, which is supposed to be rather melodramatic according to some critics. This is a war-novel and at the same time a love-story. Stella Rodney is a middle-aged widow with a twenty-year-old son who is now in the army. Her lover, Robert Kelway, who is at the War Office, is suspected of selling information to the enemy. A government secret agent, Harrison, who is shadowing Robert, offers to give up his pursuit if Stella will break with Robert and become his lover.

Though the story is neither obscure nor inconsistent the situation itself seems to be quite improbable, and we can never understand why Robert's hand should be turned against his country. At the same time, however, the impression of the scenes which will be quoted in the following, can never be forgotten, because those descriptions not only decorate the scenes but also give the story the symbolic meaning.

In some writers, or perhaps in most writers, the plot itself or characters themselves are most important, and factors like mood, atmosphere or tone are no more than accessories. But in Elizabeth Bowen, these apparently insignificant things are in fact very important and sometimes atmosphere itself appears to be the real hero in her works, because it is closely connected with the psychological movement of the characters and remains to be *a* reality which can arouse sympathy from the readers.

As has been pointed out in the previous paper, the first passage of *The Heat of*

the Day is also suggestive of the tone which flows through this story :

That Sunday, from six o'clock in the evening, it was a Viennese orchestra that played. The season was late for an outdoor concert ; already leaves were drifting on to the grass stage —here and there one turned over, crepitating as though in the act of dying and during the music some more fell. (p. 5)*

The 'drifting', 'crepitating' and 'dying' of leaves in the evening of September transparency suggest that the people appearing in this story are always obliged to face the sense of death during war time. They hate autumn and idolize summer just as they prefer day to night and sunshine to dusk :

Many of them paused in the gateways doubtful—all they left behind was in sunshine, while this hollow which was the source of music was found to be also the source of dusk. War had made them idolize day and summer ; night and autumn were enemies...But the light was so low, so theatrical and so yellow that it was evident it would soon be gone. The incoming tide was evening. Glass-clear darkness, in which each leaf was defined, already formed in the thicket behind the orchestra and was the other element of the stage. (p. 6)

In the latter half of the above passage, 'yellow, theatrical light' is contrasted to 'glass clear darkness'. Her susceptibility to light and colour can never be missed also in *The Heat of the Day* —especially, 'yellowing light of autumn evening' will appear again in the following quotation to emphasize the effect of time and season. But as it was dealt with before, it will not be pointed out in particular in this paper.

In the first part of chapter 5, the meeting of Robert and Stella in September two years ago is explained :

They had met one another, at first not very often, throughout that heady autumn of the first London air raids. Never had any season been more felt ; one bought the poetic sense of it with the sense of death. Out of mists of morning charred by the smoke from ruins each day rose to a height of unmisty glitter ; between the last of sunset and first note of the siren the darkening glassy tenseness of evening was drawn fine. From the moment of waking you tasted the sweet autumn not less because of an acidity on the tongue and nostrils ; and as the singed dust settled and smoke diluted you felt more and more called upon to observe the daytime as pure and curious holiday from fear. (p. 85)

When we are confronted by death, how are we to cope with it? Even 'to work' or 'to

* Page numbers after the quotations refer to the Jonathan Cape Edition (1954)

think' may be 'to ache', and 'fatigue' 'the one reality', but on the other hand, the sense of death makes our feeling more transparent and even poetic. There is a 'particular conjunction of life and death' in the autumn of 1940 :

The wall between the living and the living became less solid as the wall between the living and the dead thinned. In that September transparency* people became transparent, only to be located by the just darker flicker of their hearts. Strangers saying 'Good night, good luck', to each other at street corners, as the sky first blanched then faded with evening each hoped not to die that night, still more not die unknown. (p. 87)

and especially for Stella, that autumn of 1940 is deeply impressed on her memory as a symbol of their love :

...her early knowing of Robert was associated with the icelike tinkle of broken glass being swept up among the crisping leaves, and with the charred freshness of every morning. She could recapture the 1940 autumn only in sensation; thoughts, if there had been any, could not be found again. She remembered the lightness, after her son had left, of loving no particular person now left in London—till one morning she woke to discover that lightness gone. That was the morning when, in the instant before opening her eyes, she saw Robert's face with a despairing hallucinatory clearness. When she did open her eyes, it had been to stare round her room in sunshine certain that he was dead. *Something* final had happened in any case. (p. 88)

The extraordinary battle in the sky in that unprecedented autumn made the movement of their hearts imperceptible and transfixed. And they did not fall in love until Stella 'woke to the apprehension of loss in the morning of October'. Here the importance of season and its sybolic meaning seems to be greater than the hero and heroine of this story.

It was an early October Saturday afternoon that Robert and Stella visited his mother at Holme Dene. She remembered the day in May when she attended to the funeral of Cousin Francis Morris, where she did not want to go because the relatives felt coolly towards her on account of 'the disastrous end of her short marriage'. The impression of the two visits is written as follows :

The two stations also, in Stella's mind, became epitomes of the two most poignant seasons—in spring, in autumn everything telegraphs its mystery to your senses; nothing is trite. And more: in these years the idea of war made you see any peaceful scene as it were through glass.

* The word 'transparency' (or 'transparent') seems to be one of her favourite words and will appear again in the following quotations. Here, it is applied both for season and people.

Only, while that day in May had been moody and overcast, this in October was elatingly sunny — and she was here with Robert, not Harrison. (p. 99)

But everything ran counter to her expectations there, and especially she felt unpleasant and desolate when her attention was drawn to the butter arrangements — ‘each one of the family had his or her own ration placed before his or her own plate in a differently coloured china shell.’ And her anxieties, uneasiness are intensified in the ‘chemically yellowing light’:

The sun had been going down while tea had been going on, its chemically yellowing light intensifying the boundary trees. Reflections, cast across the lawn into the lounge, gave the glossy thinness of celluloid to indoor shadow. Stella pressed her thumb against the edge of the table to assure herself this was a moment she was living through — as in the moment before a faint she seemed to be looking at everything down a darkening telescope. Having brought the scene back again into focus by staring at window-reflections in the glaze of the teapot, she dared look again at Robert, seated across the table, opposite her, between his nephew and niece. Late afternoon striking into the blue of his eyes made him look like a young man in technicolour. That the current between him and her should be cut off, she had expected; dullness, numbness, even grotesquery she had foreseen. (pp. 108-9)

In the following passage, the pallid roses of October also suggest the fate of Holme Dene:

She looked out of the window, down at the betrayed garden, in which the gnomes, bird-bath and rustic seats now seemed to hover indeterminately. From this attic height you looked through the tops of trees; their illusion of forestlike density was lost; their thinning foliage stood out tattered against the sky. There were no rooks. Seen through transparent dusk the pattern of flowerbeds in the lawn looked impermanent, and those palled roses seemed to have lingered on only because they were not only for this year but for this *place*, ever, the final ones. (p. 116)

When Stella returned from their visit to Holme Dene and parted from Robert at a street corner because he had to go on duty that night, she became nervous and uneasy:

The country seemed to have followed her back into London, and to be on her tracks like a disaffecting ghost, undoing the reality of the city; around her the unsubstantial darkness was quickened by a not quite wind. Shreds of leaves from the woods deadened the impact of her heels on the pavement; up out of basements came an autumnal mould smell; a loose gutter high on a damaged building now and then creaked overhead like a bough. All this, with the amputa-

tion of their good-night as lovers, keyed up her susceptibilities to a pitch. In the sky there was a slow, stealthy massing of clouds: she walked hatless, and once or twice a drop—single, sinister, warmish—splashed on her forehead. She was walking west, towards the torn pale late light—this troubled lingering of a day that had been troubling oppressed her, as did the long perspective of the extinct street that so few people frequented and none crossed. Never never would the peacetime lighted windows and lamps of city autumn late evening have been more comforting. Muteness was falling on London with the uneasy dark; (p. 120)

Stella's uneasiness is increased by the dark, mute, sinister atmosphere of the autumn night. And her great longing for light and peace is expressed rather emotionally, as, 'Never never would the peace-time lighted windows and lamps of city autumn late evening have been more comforting'.

When she came home, she found Harrison standing at the entrance to her house. As she felt 'Nothing could have been worse than coming home alone' tonight, she allowed him to come in. But it was impossible for Stella to talk friendly with him, and high words were exchanged between them. When the 'rasping wordy battle' was quieted they became aware that rain was falling:

She heard him run the blind up, throw up the sash as far as it would go: an outdoor breath swelled the curtains, sifting round them damply into the room. She raised her head to listen, but heard no rain—heard nothing: the *silence* could not have been more complete if Harrison walked straight on out of the window. ...Rain was to be seen glinting in the light she let through behind her; behind the fine fall was the sighing darkness... Assuaging blankness out of the open window began to enter her through the eyes. The embrasure felt like a balcony; one stood projected, high up, into the unseen unsounding sentient world of rain. Nothing more than an intimation was in the dark air; the fall's softness vicariously was to be felt on the roofs around, in the streets below. Only by the smell of refreshed stone was one to know that this rain fell on a city. The night was neither warm nor cold; it belonged to no season; it was a night of rain. (p. 133)

Here, season is no longer felt and both Harrison and Stella 'became as anonymous as the city they over looked, and though fated to speak again, could be felt to be 'depersonalized speakers in a drama which should best of all have remained as silent as it essentially was'.

'Season' is the external change of nature, while 'time' is the internal consistency of the past, present and future. Apparently there is no necessary connection between them,

but when the season enters our feeling or consciousness, and influences us, it is closely related to time. Therefore, when we are cut off from season, so are we from time. Thus even though the clock ticks, the room is entirely cut off from the outside world.

The room lacked one more thing: apprehension of time. Inside it the senses were cut off from hour and season; nothing spoke but the clock. The day had gone from the moment Stella had drawn down the fitted blinds and drawn across them the deadening curtains: now nothing took its place. Every crack was stopped; not a mote of darkness could enter—the room, sealed up in its artificial light, remained exaggerated and cerebral. (p. 53)

In the above passage, 'hour' is used almost identically with 'time'. But in the following they are somewhat differently used.

At the hour when the master's mother arrived, reflections up from the river prolonged daylight: a smoulder of yellow from the woods entered the house. She had forgotten that by travelling west you enter longer days: this hour, as she stood looking down the length of a room at a fire distantly burning inside white marble, seemed to be outside time—eternal luminousness of dusk in which nothing but the fire's flutter and the clock's ticking out there in the hall were to be heard. Or, in her fatigue she could have imagined this was another time, rather than another country, that she had come to. (pp. 155-6)

And her apprehension of time is more symbolically expressed in the next passage, which follows a long monologue representing her agitated mind when she knew that a person like Harrison had visited her late Cousin Francis, at Mount Morris:

Stella woke next morning not knowing where she was, or when. Her place in time had been lost. A certainly new day penetrated the curtains, but which day? Her watch told her the hour, but then so did instinct—what she was forced to grope for, as though for her identity, was the day of the week, the month of the year. Supine, she tried to read something into the pattern of the light-yellowed curtains. Yesterday no postman had come...she remembered another morning of waking only to Robert's face. Were these deep sleeps of hers periodic trances, her spirit's passing into another season? Were they the birth-sleeps, each time, of some profound change? That would be to be proved; she got up and drew the curtains—this morning swans were on the river.

This was a day of October size, of unearthly disassociation from everything... Yes, October for a few days more—how long this autumn had felt; the season might have been staying for her decision. In the valley there was something decisive about the narrowing of this path so many feet must have trodden without a swerve. Here where she paused and stood, between the

sun-shafted beech trees, it was as though the answer had already provided itself and did not matter. This was the peace of the moment in which one sees the world for a moment innocent of oneself. One cannot remain away: while she looked up at sun-pierced triumphant golden fans of leaves it began again to be she who saw them. Still, though, this was the early morning of a unique day: the very day in which—who knew? — something might intervene to save her..... A rapture of strength could be felt in the boughs; and there travelled through the layered, lit, shaded, thinning and crossing foliage, and was deflected downward on to the laurels, a breathless glory. In the hush the dead could be imagined returning from all the wars; and, turning the eyes from arch to arch of boughs, from ray to ray of light, one knew some expectant sense to be tuned in to an unfinished symphony of love.

The seeming of this to be for ever was astonishing — until a leaf fell slowly, veering towards her eyes as though she had brought time with her into the wood. (pp. 169-70)

Here, season no longer means a natural phenomenon, but has a symbolic meaning upon her mind. She feels as if she were cut off from everything in the world and even from herself, and stood at the moment of eternity 'in which something might intervene to save her'. But it was impossible for her to be in such a condition for ever: she had to turn to walk back towards a call from the house.

Stella's son, Roderick, came to Wisteria Lodge to see his cousin Nettie who was said to have had a mental breakdown. The following is a November landscape he saw out of the window:

He had been looking past her, out of the window. A distance of fields, woods and diluted November sky did indeed stretch without any other feature: sky and earth at last exhaustedly met—there was no impact, no mystery, no horizon, simply a nothing more. This was a window at the back of a house at the edge of a town; Roderick recollected that Cousin Nettie had not for years now looked out of any other. And years ago she must have ceased to look out of this, for today she sat with her back to it with finality. What she liked must be this extreme end of the room, light on her work or the unassailing sensation of having nothing but nothing behind her back. Across the sky over her head ran the bolted window-sash: this timeless colourless afternoon silhouetted the upper part of her figure, her rolled up soft hair, the delicate projections of her face. (p. 198-9)

No explanation is given anywhere of whether Nettie was really insane or not. We can only guess from what she said and the behaviour of other persons. 'No impact', 'no mystery', 'no horizon', 'nothing' (used three times), 'timeless', 'colourless'... these words

emphasize her solitude and resignation with the 'diluted November sky' for a background.

The night before Robert's death, Stella talked with him about their love and the meaning of having a country. Filled with dread she thought of :

...leaves of autumn crisply being swept up, that crystal ruined London morning when she had woken to his face; she saw street after street fading into evening after evening, the sheen of spring light running on the water towards the bridges on which one stood, the vulnerable eyes of Louie stupidly carrying sky about in them, the raw earth lip of Cousin Francis's grave and the pink-stamened flowers of that day alight on the chestnuts in May gloom, the asphalt pathway near Roderick's camp thrust up and cracked by the swell of ground, mapped by seeded grass. She could remember nothing before everything had had this poignancy...and yet they had only been in love for two years. (p. 265)

Though a sad uneasy atmosphere prevails over the scenes, we hear a note of hope in the end of the story. Louie, a cockney-girl, had a war-baby, and took him straight round to the place where her parents had lived :

The thin air which had taken the house's place was, now that she stood and breathed in it, after all full of today and sunshine; the ridges left by the foundations feathered and stirred with grass in light and shadow. It was September, dahlias and asters blooming only a garden or two away. This was, as it always had been, a very quiet road, inland, with lime trees planted along the pavement. The baby slept in his pram on the flat site of the entrance-path to the house: uphill, the church clock struck, and she looked up at the sound. Next day, the sun was succeeded by a white quiet light. (p. 319)

Though the main subject of this paper is restricted to season and time, as is already shown in the subtitle, other natural settings have also been added when they seemed to be related to the phenomena on which the season had some influence. As we have seen above, however, the symbolic force of season and time appears to be the most important factor which creates an atmosphere peculiar to E. Bowen.

The word 'atmosphere' is sometimes applied rather easily and vaguely, but in Bowen's works, it is never used at random or groundlessly. A minute calculation is made on the effect of 'season' and 'time' to give reality to the scenes in which her sensitive penetration of human psychology can be detected. It should, of course, be remembered that the mere description of season or time is not creative of atmosphere. When season or time is described with imagination and sensitivity, it adds symbolic force. Thus, it can play an important part in the main current of the story itself.