

Notes on Elizabeth Bowen's Early Short Stories

— Style found in her susceptibility to light and colour —

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Elizabeth Bowen has been celebrated as one of the best writers in modern short stories even after *The Heat of the Day* appeared in 1949, and she established her claim to be one of the most representative novelists in England today. Some critics think that Bowen's novels are 'by far her most important achievement'.¹⁾ But her voice is more clearly and impressively heard in the short stories than in the novels, because she is not the sort of writer who entertains readers with plot or character delineation but one whose interest lies chiefly in atmosphere.

This atmosphere seems to keep the tone she wants us to hear more intense and concentrating in the short stories which should be written within strict limits of time and space.

It is interesting that she herself sets forth her views of modern short stories comparing them with the novel and with the cinema as follows:

"The short story is a young art: as we know it, it is the child of this century. Poetic tautness and clarity are so essential to it that it may be said to stand at the edge of prose; in its use of action it is nearer to drama than the novel. The cinema, itself busy with technique, is of the same generation: in the last thirty years the two arts have been accelerating together. They have affinities — neither is sponsored by a tradition: both are, accordingly, free: both still, are self-conscious, show a self-imposed discipline and regard for form: both have, to work on immense matter — the disorientated romanticism of the age. The new literature, whether written or visual, is an affair of reflexes, of immediate susceptibility, of associations not examined by reason:

1) Cf. Jocelyn Brooke: *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 6 (1952)

it does not attempt a synthesis. Narrative of any length involves continuity, sometimes a forced continuity: it is here that the novel too often becomes invalid. But action, which must in the novel be complex and motivated, in the short story regains heroic simplicity.”

Here we see that the short story never means the condensed novel; it is quite different in form and effect, having a peculiar sphere of its own. We remember that James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, D. H. Lawrence, Sherwood Anderson, etc., broke with stereotyped tradition. These writers brought realism and poetry to the short story. As for E. Bowen, Scott James says, “since she has so much of the lyrical poet in her it is not surprising that she is at her best in short stories”.²⁾

The story now has a tendency to describe less but suggests more, so that the reader must supply the confirmation of his own experience or imagination. H. E. Bates, too, refers to the similarities between the short story and the cinema; “The short story, in fact, moved nearer to the film, and the two arts, rendering life largely by suggestion, brief episodes, picture-sequences, indirect narration and the use of symbolism, developed together.”³⁾

When we finish reading E. Bowen’s story, we often find that we have almost forgotten the plot or characters, though, strange to say, we remember vividly and impressively the atmosphere brought out by weather, season, landscape, etc. We feel Bowen’s visual sense is strongly exemplified in her stories. J. Brooke points out Bowen’s pictorial quality comparing her writing with the work of French Impressionists:

“There is undoubtedly, a quality in Miss Bowen’s writing which suggests the work of French Impressionists — in particular, one remembers her intense feeling for light;”⁴⁾

The word ‘Impressionist’ involves such risk that we may consider it as an obscure and vague style of painting. However, on the contrary, the impressionist himself is far from being vague, but is deliberate and conscious, and endeavours

2) E. Bowen : *Collected Impressions*, p. 38 (1950)

3) R. A. Scott James : *Fifty Years of English Literature 1900-1950*, p. 183 (1951)

4) H. E. Bates : *The Modern Short Story*, p. 207 (1945)

5) J. Brooke : *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 7.

to express what is caught in a moment according to strictly scientific principles.

Bowen, too, endeavours to draw an impressionistic picture with her special technique called 'susceptivity'. She never leaves even the trifle things to chance but makes a minute calculation beforehand. And yet she succeeds in giving us an impression or tone as a whole.

There is one more thing that cannot be forgotten when we talk about her pictorial quality. Let me quote from Brooke again:

"Another possible source for this pictorial quality in her work — and especially for her sensitivity to light — is the fact that Miss Bowen has spent much of her life in Ireland, where light is an extremely important factor in the landscape, and can, as Miss Bowen herself has said, 'determine one's mood, one's day and one's entire sense of the world,'"⁶⁾

It is said that Irish people have the intuitive power and sharp insight which can catch the true aspect of nature in a moment; there is a strange fusion between their hearts and nature.

In her non-fictional work, *Bowen's Court*, we can vividly find her sensitivity to color and light:

"Bowen's Court shows almost living changes of colour. In fine weather the limestone takes on a warm whitish powdery bloom — with its parapet cut out against a bright blue sky this might almost be a building in Italy. After persistent rain the stone stains a dark slate and comes out in irregular black streaks — till the house blots into its dark rainy background of trees. In cold or warm dusk it goes either still or lavender; in full moonlight it glitters like silvered chalk."

These Irish characteristics are most conspicuous in her early works, *The Last September*, a novel published in 1929, and *The Cat Jumps and Other Stories* published in 1934. The latter has been chosen for the present study and her peculiar susceptibility to light and colour will be pointed out in the following.

6) *Loc. cit.*

7) E. Bowen : *Bowen's Court*, p. 22 (194?)

In many cases, Bowen strikes the note she wants us to hear in the first sentence or part, and it lingers in our memory till the end. The following is the first part of *The Disinherited*:

Autumn had set in early. While the days were still glowing, the woods took on from a distance a yellow, unreal sheen, like a reflection from metal; their fretted outlines hardened against the blond open hills that the vibrations of summer no longer disturbed. In the early morning, dew spread a bright white bloom between long indigo shadows; the afternoon air quickened, but after sunset mists diluted the moon. This first phase of autumn was lovely; decay first made itself felt as an extreme sweetness: with just such a touch of delicious morbidity a lover might contemplate the idea of death.

Later the rain came, and there were drenching monotone days; the leaves, rotting uncoloured, slid down through the rain. Mid-autumn set in mild, immobile and nerveless; the days had unclear margins, mists webbed the gardens all day, the sun slanting slowly through them to touch the brown pear-trees and pale yellow currant-leaves, here and there a marigold or a sodden rose. There was no wind, and the woods stood heavily tense; against their darkness, in the toneless November evenings, the oaks were still yellow and shed a frightening glare. Everything rotted slowly. The dark, rain-swollen rivers flowed fast between bleaching sedges, with leaves caught on the current. After the rain, an unlit grey sky bound the earth, and pools threaded the grass and lay unglittering inside the brittle reeds. Now and then the skies were disturbed by a high-up swift rusting sign: the summer birds flying south. The shredded last leaves still clung to the trees, as though they would not fall: eternity seemed to have set in at late autumn.

(*The Disinherited*, pp. 49-50)

Here, Bowen draws the delicate changes of autumn air — early, middle and late autumn — using rich colour, such as yellow, blond, indigo, white, brown, pale yellow, grey, etc., taking the effect of light into consideration. In

1) Page numbers after the quotations refer to Jonathan Cape Edition (1949)

spite of its colourfulness the atmosphere of this passage is solitary and rather morbid, and suggests the tone of this story.

The next quotation shows the changes of weather from morning to night :

That morning....., Miss Fox was put in the drawing-room to work..... In cold, windy April sunlight she crawled round and round the floor, with pins in her mouth. The glazed chinz looked horribly cold..... That same afternoon, the sun went in. Sharp dark clouds with steely white edges began bowling over the sky and their passing made the whole landscape anxious and taut... The wind, coming up and up, whistled among the willows; the dykes cut the country up with uneasy gleams. The grass was still fawn-coloured; only their own restlessness told them that it was spring... That night, in a wind direct from the Ural mountains, the house began to creak and stain like a ship..... The wind puffed down the chimney occasional gusts of smoke that made her eyes smart.

(*The Needlecase*, pp. 172-3)

The atmosphere of this passage is rather cold, sharp and taut, and this suggests the mood of Miss Fox who looks like a 'jointed image'.

As stated before, 'light' is the keynote in Bowen's stories. She deals with it in various ways—sometimes dazzling and bright, another time dim and sad. She uses light not only for the explanation of weather or landscape but also for the psychological effect of the characters :

Behind them the last lights of streets were strung along the horizon; the thin glow above a provincial city hung on the sky. But flight was life to Davina, with nothing to leave behind. A friend's unknown friends are deamons or demigods with frightful attributes. Marian's heart sank at the thought of the meeting ahead. The night air was uncalming and anxious: no moon but a rolling hurry of clouds: a circle of rotting flower stalks outside the petrol station shivered under their headlights in the dark wind...A glittering Neon sign like wolves' eyes read: OPEN ALL NIGHT, at which thought a dry weariness pervaded the brain... The road-house stood at the cross-roads, its row of Christmas-card windows shedding a fictitious glow... The wind moaned cheerlessly over the down behind, but the scene had a hard air of

late night merriment, like a fixed grin... A long row of swinging lanterns bobbed in their own horrid light as they pushed open the door. The lounge was empty and bald as the inside of a band-box, glazed with synthetic panelling. The chairs were askew, empty, with flattened cushions; ash-trays sent up a cold fume; the place wore an air of sudden, sheepish vacuity, as though a large party had just got up and gone. (*The Disinherited*, pp. 62-3)

Davina is now going to flee with Marian; behind her the 'lights of streets', and above her 'no moon but a rolling hurry of clouds'. In the dark, there is no light but the headlights and it seems to make Davina's heart lonely and anxious. The latter half is drawn with interesting images which bring out the atmosphere of the scene with its personified sense and in which light takes an important part: a glittering Neon sign looks like wolves' eyes; the windows shedding a fictitious glow are compared to those of a Christmas-card; the wind moans cheerlessly like someone overwhelmed with grief; the scene having a stiff air of late night merriment is compared to a grinning face which does not change its expression; the emptiness and baldness of the lounge to the inside of a band-box, etc.

In *The Disinherited*, as mentioned above, she seems to be skilled in expressing the anxious atmosphere of night caused by the psychological movement of the characters. The following is also from the same story:

Their figures were silhouetted against a patch of yard lamplight. Both the young women were hatless and wore heavy overcoats. Against the night sky, clotted and dense, the papery ilex shivered; night wind, with a sinister flitter of dead leaves, raced round the yard, whose cobbles dappled away into leathery bat's wing darkness beyond the lamp. (p. 58)

Even in the darkness of night, we can distinguish the young women's figures, the papery ilex, the flittering dead leaves and the dappled cobbles. 'Leathery bats wing darkness' suggests Bowen's peculiar sensitiveness to the metaphorical expression of darkness.

These descriptions of dark night are felt more impressive and vivid when contrasted with the brightness of indoors as follows:

In the dense red-shaded lamplight sealed in by the pane the two ladies' lace jabots, the two gentlemen's shirt-fronts, stood out like tombstones: the intent quartette, the glazed cabinets and woolly white rugs, all looked embedded in something transparent, solid and hot, like clarified red wax. (p. 60)

Though the room appears to be peaceful 'in the dense red-shaded lamplight' with 'the glazed cabinets and woolly white rugs' there is an atmosphere like tombstones. And in spite of the darkness and coldness of outdoors Davina has 'a flicker of spirit' and feels 'flight is life to her, with nothing to leave behind.'

In *The Apple-tree*, too, she made a contrast between indoor comfort and outdoor coldness, but the first sentence rather suggests something eerie about the house:

Obviously there was nothing funny about the house. Under the eerie cold sky, pale but not bright with moonlight among bare wind shaken trees, the house's bulk loomed, honourably substantial. Lit-up windows sustained the party with promise of indoor comfort: firelight on decanters, room after room heavy curtained, Simon's feeling for home made concrete (at last, after wandering years) in deep leather chairs, padded fenders, and sectional book-shelves, 'domes of silence' on yielding carpets: an unaspiring, comfortable sobriety.

(*The Apple-tree*, p. 178)

The following quotation is suggestive of a scene of cinema in black and white, having swiftness and tension of movement:

The immense facade of the house rushed glaring on their headlamps: between high white-shuttered windows pilasters soared out of sight above an unlit fanlight like patterns of black ice.... But then the fanlight amazingly sprang into light, the hall door burst open on a perspective of pillars, and with so much thrusting and force that this seemed a muffled riot, dark people shot out, surrounded the car, and pulled open both doors at once. Marian ducked in a sweep of night air.

(*The Disinherited*, p. 65)

Black is sometimes confused with darkness, but they are of a different character:

The idea of apples entered his mind and remained, frightfully clear; an innocent pastoral image seen black through a dark transparency. This idea of fruit detaching itself, and from a leafy height, falling in the stale, shut-up room, had the sharpness of hallucination: he thought he was going mad.

(*The Apple-tree*, p. 184)

There is a vivid 'pastoral image seen black through a dark transparency', which suggests Bowen's sharpness of visual sense.

Next also is a description of indoors wearing an air of hollowness after outrage, in which light shines coldly:

One door stood open, and light peered in at the glacial sheeted outlines of furniture and a chandelier that hung in a bag like a cheese and glittered inside the muslin. A chill came from the hearth stones; the house was masterless... Smoke and human stuffiness thickened the air of this room with its dead undertone of chill on which a snapping wood fire had little effect. It was a high, shabby, gilt-and white octangnal ante-room, the naked shutters of three windows fortified by iron bars....

(*The Disinherited*, pp. 66-7)

She excels in describing not only the light of night but also that of daylight which is soon going to be turned to twilight, using similes:

The room where they all sat seemed to be made of glass, it collected the whole daylight; the candles were still waiting. Over the garden, day still hung like a pink flag; over the trees like frozen feathers, the enchanted icy lake, the lawn.... So the coloured candles were lit, the garden went dark with loneliness and was immediately curtained out.

(*The Tommy Crans*, p. 10)

She is also sensitive to sunshine with such epithets as 'milky' and 'misty' which seem to express the characteristics of Irish weather:

Next morning, pale milky sunshine flooded the facade of Lord Thingummy's house... The solitary housemaid having risen at nine, opened the shutters all over the house, and long shafts of misty sunshine slid through the rooms.

(*The Disinherited*, p. 90)

Sunday morning was milky-blue, mild and sunny. Mrs. Bettersley appeared

punctually for breakfast, beaming, pink, and impassible,..... The rest, with a glance of regret at the shining November garden, went off like lambs.

(*The Apple-tree*, p. 185)

These passages remind us of the atmosphere of those famous pictures 'The Sun in the Fog' or 'Water Lilies' by Claude Monet, the leader of the Impressionist School, whose aim is chiefly to reproduce the effects of light and air.

The next passage also gives an impression of his picture called 'Rouen Cathedral.'

Its lichened barn-roofs were yellow, and from the church spire the weather-cock now and then shot out one sharp gold ray; from the tower there came up, climbing the hill on Sundays, ponderous chimes. A clot of thin smoke hung melting in watery river light over the roofs of the village; after sunset a few dark lights outlined the three-cornered green. A wide pitch-black by-pass road with white kerbs swept south round the foot of the hill, cutting off the old village from the new building estate. On the far flank of the village the stretching brick-red tentacles of the city made their advance over water-meadows tufted with lines of willow; far off, the brittle city spires pricked at the skyline. The small, shallow river on which the village was built ran into another, grand one; a beetle-green gasometer stood at this point, and there was a steel bridge over which London expresses rumbled and rang. Sometimes a swan, disturbed, sailed up the back-water. (*The Disinherited*, p. 50)

Here, Bowen draws the landscape from far and near, using rich pigment, and its features stand out more sharply being seen in a particular kind of light such as a 'sharp gold ray', and 'watery river light', etc.

Besides light and colour, there are interesting uses of similes, metaphors and personifications which make her writing so original and sometimes humourous. And some of them have been shown and explained in the passages quoted before.

It would be a dangerous inquiry to compare writing with painting directly, and a superficial view to say that the visible world is Bowen's main preoccupation as a writer, but when we want to gain a better understanding of E.

Bowen's distinguished quality as a short-storyist, it may be helpful to look at her from the view point of her pictorial quality.

In comparison with Katherine Mansfield, who is also said to be a writer of sensibility, being skilled in describing the sound of objects with her sensitive ear, E. Bowen is often said to be a writer who has an unusual sense of sight rather than an auditory sense. It may be true from a comparative point of view, but the effect of sound can be found even in the passages quoted before, and especially in *The Last Night in the Old Home* and *Apple-tree*, this quality is richly detected. However, this paper has been confined to Bowen's particular susceptibility to light and colour, as it seems to be of importance for an understanding of her early short stories.