

Elizabeth Bowen's "The Demon Lover": Into the Hinterland with the Demonic Wakefield

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Elizabeth Bowen is known as a writer whose "work reflects her own times and centers on women making their way precariously across the minefield of life," and whose "characters reflect unease, uncertainty, puzzlement, and wariness."¹⁾ Especially, her most frequently anthologized story, "The Demon Lover,"²⁾ fully represents these characteristics. However, unlike most of her other stories, it makes use of the basic structure of a gothic ballad of the return of a retaliatory dead lover. Charles E. May summarizes the typical pattern:

Although there are many different versions of the story, the basic plot focuses on a young woman's promise to love her young man forever and to await his return from battle. However, when he is reported dead or missing, she meets and plans to marry another man. Usually on the wedding day, the lost lover returns, in its most melodramatic versions as a rotting corpse, and carries the young bride away to join him in death.³⁾

The title shows that Bowen has the intention to use the structure of the legendary tale, but she does not depict the demon directly. Bowen's story, more refined than the ballad, focuses on the uneasiness of a woman who betrays her soldier-lover and is horrified by his unexpected return.

Reading through the story, the reader tends to regard it as a modern version of the legend, in which a dead man, abandoned by his fiancée, comes back and takes her to his world of death. Bowen weaves this framework into her repeated motif of wartime stories. Robert L. Calder points out that Bowen emphasizes the wartime environment in the story, "[I]n the preface to the American edition, Bowen states that the stories 'may be found interesting as documents, even if they are negligible as art. This discontinuous writing, nominally "inventive," is the only diary I have kept."⁴⁾ Bowen writes in the Preface:

Every writer during this time was aware of the personal cry of the individual. And he was aware of the passionate attachment of men and women to every object or image or place or love or fragment of memory with which his or her destiny seemed to be identified, and by which the destiny seemed to be assured.⁵⁾

Hermione Lee discusses the relation of selfhood and place in Bowen's stories. "What has always ominously characterized her treatment of place is the loss of self. When places cease to function properly, their inhabitants lose selfhood, and are doubly 'disinherited.'"⁶⁾ Reading "The Demon Lover" independently of other Bowen stories, the reader may not appreciate a hidden motif in which the warped London house signifies Mrs. Kathleen Drover's unstable mental state.

Calder exhumes a forgotten book that conveys the sentiments of the wartime women contemporary with Bowen.

[W]omen peacefully married to men whom they respect, for whom they feel deep affection and whose children they have borne, who will yet turn heartsick and lose colour at the sight of a khaki clad figure, a lean ghost from a lost age, a word, a memory. These are they whose youth was violently severed by war and death; a word on the telephone, a scribbled line on paper, and their future ceased. They have built up their lives again, but their safety is not absolute, their fortress not impregnable."⁷⁾

Calder's quote is the keynote of "The Demon Lover." It is also true of Bowen's other works such as *The Little Girls* and "The Happy Autumn Fields." This is part of Bowen's postscript to the U. S. edition of *The Demon Lover*: "It seems to me that during the war in England the overcharged subconsciousnesses of everybody overflowed and merged. It is because the general subconsciousness saturates these stories . . ." (Mulberry Tree, 95). Kathleen's soldier-lover, who looms twenty five years later as a demon lover, is the product of the contemporary women's collective subconscious. Mrs. Drover's anxiety is part of the collective subconscious fear of the women whose ex-fiancés died or were missing in World War I.

It is with good reason that Bowen hides the details of the soldier-lover's facial features and gives him no individuality. Mrs. Drover herself cannot remember his face: "She remembered — but with one white burning blank as where acid has dropped on a photograph: *Under no conditions* could she remember his face" (665, original italics). So long as Bowen makes use of the folklore of a dead lover's return, the demon lover must be an everyman-type ghost, whom many other contemporary women promised to love and await.

The title also suggests that the reader not seek for reality in interpreting the identity of the demon. Bowen does not deny his demonic nature. A supernatural figure could be adroit in disguising himself as a caretaker or taxi driver. A totally rational interpretation, if anything, may damage the subtle nuance of the story. Bowen puts this unrealistic aspect in the very realistic setting of war time London. However, as the story unfolds, the destruction caused by the London Blitz seems to be unrealistic, and the threat by the demon lover seems to be realistic for the reader as well as for Mrs. Drover.

It is not only the war time atmosphere ("broken chimneys and parapets"), the narrator's direct

remark on the sparse population ("an unfamiliar queerness had silted up"), and her alluringly weird expression ("no human eye watched Mrs Drover's return"), but also the repeated use of personification that makes the opening paragraph seem more bizarre and therefore more fit for a ghost story: "she slowly forced round her latchkey in an *unwilling* lock, then gave the door, which had warped, a push with her knee. Dead air came out to *meet* her as she went in" (661, emphases added). Bowen does not merely emphasize the paucity of population but suggests the reader feel the existence of something other than "human." The author must have an intention to make her story seem more like a ghost story; thus she makes preparation for the letter-writer to seem more appropriate as a demon.

But the impressively personified expressions in the first paragraph disappear in the following paragraphs. A weird atmosphere is fully attained in the first paragraph. After that the author seeks to depict the heroine's psyche that is forced to upset confronting super-natural phenomena. Thinking of the repetitive references to the two World Wars and their deep but subtle effects on young heroines in Bowen's other stories, it is not a mere conjecture that Mrs. Kathleen Drover has already sustained some mental damage from the wars. What drives her to identify the taxi driver with her ex-lover, despite the fact that she has forgotten his face, is her delusion made worse by the past war, which scarred young Kathleen's mind, and the present war, the destruction of which, she cannot avoid seeing everywhere in London.

What leads her to her forgotten ex-soldier-lover is a sense of debt to him. Although the narrator says that Mrs. Drover cannot remember his face now, such obligation has accumulated in her subconscious. The moment she finds the unstamped letter on the table in her shut-up house, the debt begins to emerge from subconscious oblivion. Seeing everything in her damaged house, she feels as if disconnected from everyone else. Ironically, only the letter links her to someone else, to whom, however, she admits herself not having been faithful.

The story is told through a third-person narrator, so omniscient as to reveal what Mrs. Drover feels: "So, wherever he may be waiting, I shall not know him. You have no time to run from a face you do not expect" (665). The second sentence shows something like her interior monologue. The narrator arbitrarily limits her own omniscience. She knows, but hides facts about the letter: who wrote it, who put it on the table, and how its writer entered the house. The narrator also leaves it unsaid what the fiancé has been doing and where he has been for twenty five years.

The fiancé, whether he is a demon or just a survivor of the war, has continued observing Kathleen for twenty five years. Such an unnatural situation reminds the reader of the title character of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Wakefield," in which a man leaves his wife, moves over to the next street to watch the smallest changes in her life, and then returns after twenty years. The narrator of "The Demon Lover" implies that Kathleen has been watched. After Kathleen married William Drover "at thirty-two," to her very great relief, "her movements as Mrs Drover were circumscribed, and she dismissed any idea that they were still watched" (664). The narrator keeps silent about who has watched her, but it is

evident that person has observed her five years more than Wakefield. The letter-writer claims, “The years have gone by at once slowly and fast. . . [N]othing has changed” (662).

Unlike Wakefield’s wife, Mrs. Drover feels someone watching her. As she confesses that she has forgotten her ex-lover’s face, she would not realize the identity of the person who has observed her, even if she caught sight of him. In contrast to Wakefield’s perverse, inexplicable attitude toward his wife, the man’s attitude toward Kathleen, if he is the ex-lover, can be persuasive in that he believes that he has gotten engaged: “‘I shall be with you,’ he said, ‘sooner or later. You won’t forget that. You need do nothing but wait’” (663). He has prepared to show up and require her to keep her word when she was nineteen. The actual title character is a demoniacally vindictive man, who has tenaciously spied on her for twenty five years. He is vengeful but very patient. If the ex-lover were one of the mythical demon lovers, he would claim her on her wedding day, without waiting for the 25th anniversary.

If the story is successful as that of horror and suspense, it is owing to the ambiguity about the taxi driver’s identity and to the heroine’s loss of sense. It is still unclear, after all, who the driver is and where he wants to take her. It is yet to be known whether Mrs. Drover recognizes him as her ex-lover and whether her final scream testifies to her insanity.

My views are that the taxi driver is the ex-lover, who has been watching her for twenty five years, and he is taking her to “the hinterland,” which should be the promised place. Her final scream is caused by the terror as she has identified the driver as the long forgotten ex-lover. The reason why “she continued to scream freely and to beat with her gloved hands on the glass” (666) is not because she has gone totally insane, but because she has come to recognize the situation she has been involved in. She seems to remember that “the hour arranged” (662) is seven o’clock, but does not seem to imagine to what particular “hinterland” he is driving her and what destiny should await her.

The letter addressed to her and her reaction to it tells not a little about Mrs. Drover’s original nature. She hesitates to look again at the letter not because she is terrified by the letter writer, but because “she felt intruded upon — and by someone contemptuous of her ways” (662). The covert reason she feels someone’s contempt is shown later: “she dismissed any idea that they [her family] were still watched” (664). She has been feeling someone watch her for some time after she married William Drover. She has been irritated rather than scared by the voyeurism.

The message of the letter is no more enigmatic than the identity of its writer. It reads: “Dear Kathleen: You will not have forgotten that today is our anniversary, and the day we said. . . .” “Mrs Drover looked for the date: it was today’s” (662). This does not necessarily mean that the letter was put in her vacant house “today.” It was not impossible to break into her house, with some tool, in the war time London, where there were few people on the street watching an intrusion. Mrs. Drover herself admits the possibility later: “Under circumstances she did not care to consider, a house can be entered without a key” (665). The writer of the letter is not a legendary demon but her ex-lover. He

"was reported missing, presumed killed" (664) in World War I, but no one confirmed his death in the battle.

The letter also reveals that its writer thinks that Kathleen and he have made some promise, and she will come at the arranged hour, and that she has not changed a bit for these twenty five years. "In view of the fact that nothing has changed, I shall rely upon you to keep your promise. I was sorry to see you leave London, but was satisfied that you would be back in time. You may expect me, therefore, at the hour arranged" (662). It is suggested that her London house is not the place promised. "[T]he hour arranged" is shown later to be seven: "the clock struck seven" (666), and the promised place should be where the taxi driver is going to take her: "the hinterland of the deserted streets" (666).

Bowen applies ambiguous epithets to Mrs. Drover. She is called "now the prosaic woman" (661) whose "movements as Mrs Drover were circumscribed" (664), and she is also "energetic and calm" (663) at once in spite of "an intermittent muscular flicker to the left of her mouth" caused by "a quite serious illness" after the birth of her third boy. The reader has no choice but to believe these descriptions. Many critics have overlooked the fact that she is "energetic." Bowen makes only a slight suggestion concerning the energetic characteristics of Mrs. Drover.

She came to London for some business that necessitated her to carry "some parcels." Instead of returning to her country house, she dropped in at her locked-up London house to take away several other things, toward the end of the day. She was to carry not a few things, without thinking of taking a taxi, at this point of time. Such a middle aged woman should be called "energetic." Considering all these circumstances, her life as Mrs. Drover is "circumscribed," and she is now "prosaic" and "calm," but she was once an "energetic" woman and still is, despite Bowen's reticent depiction.

Then what makes such an energetic woman "scream freely" (666) at the end? The only hint Bowen gives is Kathleen's unhappy reminiscence:

"I shall be with you", he said, "sooner or later. You won't forget that. You need do nothing but wait." . . . [S]he already felt that unnatural promise drive down between her and the rest of all human kind. No other way of having given herself could have made her feel so apart, lost and foresworn. She could not have plighted a more sinister troth. (663-64)

Taken "into the hinterland of deserted streets" (666), Mrs. Drover recalls having felt "so apart, lost and foresworn" (664) when she made the "sinister troth" twenty five years ago. What she felt when she was nineteen came true after twenty five years. The hinterland is an appropriate metaphor that causes her to feel "so apart" from "the rest of all human kind."

There is another factor that precipitates the energetic woman into such confusion. According to the narrator, it is her London house damaged by the Blitz. The narrator is omniscient enough to penetrate the intention of "the letter-writer" (664): "The desuetude of her former bedroom, her

married London home's whole air of being cracked cup from which, memory with its reassuring power, had either evaporated or leaked away, made a crisis — and at just this crisis the letter-writer had, knowledgeable, struck" (664). It is an aftermath of war that compelled the memories of her twelve years of family life to evaporate.

It is true that she is a little confused at this moment, but she still remains "calm" and keeps on thinking coherently. She decides on taking a taxi, and the idea will solve her two problems. One problem is how to carry her parcels to the station, and the other is how to avoid being caught by the letter-writer "at the hour arranged".

The thing was to get to the taxi before any clock struck what could be the hour. She would slip down the street and round the side of the square to where the square gave on the main road. She would return in the taxi, safe, to her own door, and bring the solid driver into the house with her to pick up the parcels from room to room. The idea of the taxi driver made her decisive, bold. (665)

Resuming "normal breathing" (665), she thinks of the possibility of the letter-writer still hanging around somewhere in her house: "It was possible that she was not alone now. She might be being waited for, downstairs" (665). This apprehension is not caused by her hallucination, the notion of which many critics stick to in order to explain her behavior. She feels "a draught that travelled up to her face. It emanated from the basement: down there a door or window was being opened by someone who chose this moment to leave the house" (666).

The man hiding is sure to find out that she is going to take a taxi, for she thinks "[t]hese ["the objects she had come up to fetch" (665)], with her shopping parcels, would be too much to carry." Or he may have heard her speaking to herself aloud. Bowen elaborately changes tone and speech, from represented speech (the above quotation) to some mixture of direct speech and the stream of consciousness narration: "I will ring up the taxi now; the taxi cannot come too soon: I shall hear the taxi out there running its engine, till I walk calmly down to it through the hall" (665). If her former represented speech sounds like her interior monologue, this sounds more like her monologue. If the letter-writer is downstairs, his chance of hearing her increases. Her state of mind is so fragile that she does not consider the possibility of someone listening stealthily to her.

After all, why does Bowen call the title character "the demon lover"? Mrs. Drover has decided what to do during her brief stay in London. She has not informed the part-time caretaker of her short visit to her house. Toward the end of the evening she makes an update in her agenda by implementing her conceit of taking a taxi. Her ex-lover has anticipated this and has prepared a disguise as a taxi driver. His ingenious manipulation of her will is equivalent to the demon's seductive manipulation of the human will. He is as unforgiving as the legendary demon lover, but even more enduring, in that he has continued watching his ex-lover's vicissitudes for 25 years, just watching, like his forerunner in

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London 100 years ago, Wakefield.

Notes

- 1) Allan E. Austin, *Elizabeth Bowen: Revised Edition*, Twayne Publishers, 1989, p. 5, 8.
- 2) Elizabeth Bowen, *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*, The Ecco Press, 1981, pp. 661–66. All subsequent references to the text are based on this edition and appear in parentheses.
- 3) Charles E. May, "The Demon Lover: Overview," *Reference Guide to Short Fiction*, 1st ed., edited by Noelle Watson, St. James Press, 1994. A secondhand quotation from Gale Literature Resource Center database.
- 4) Robert L. Calder, "'A More Sinister Troth': Elizabeth Bowen's 'The Demon Lover' as Allegory," *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 31, No. 1, Winter, 1994, pp. 91–97. A secondhand quotation from Gale Literature Resource Center database.
- 5) *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, edited by Hermione Lee, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987, p. 97. All subsequent references to the text are based on this edition and appear in parentheses.
- 6) Hermione Lee, "An Awful Illumination: *The Demon Lover* (1945) and *The Heart of the Day* (1949)," *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation*, Vision Press and Barnes & Noble Books, 1981, pp. 156–88. A secondhand quotation from Gale Literature Resource Center database.
- 7) Vera Brittain, *Testament of Friendship*, 1940. A secondhand quotation from Gale Literature Resource Center database.