

# Hallucinations in Elizabeth Bowen's Short Stories

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## I. Bowen's hallucinations

Hallucination is "the mental condition of being deceived or mistaken, or of entertaining unfounded notions; an idea or belief to which nothing real corresponds; an illusion." Also, "the apparent perception (usually by sight or hearing) of an external object when no such object is actually present. (Distinguished from *illusion* in the strict sense, as not necessarily involving a false belief.)" (*OED*) Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973) wrote in the Preface to *The Demon Lover*:

The hallucinations in the stories are not peril; not are the stories studies of mental peril; not are the stories studies of mental peril. The hallucinations are an unconscious: life, mechanized by the controls of wartime, and emotionally torn and impoverished by changes, had to complete itself in some way. It is a fact that in Britain, and especially in London, in wartime many people had strange deep intense dreams. (*Collected Impression*, 42-43)<sup>1</sup>

Bowen's hallucination can be unconscious dream, fantasy, illusion, and visible or invisible ghost. Various hallucinations of dispossessed people are shown especially in her short stories written during the Second World War. Four of these were published in her 1941 collection, *Look at All Those Roses*. The rest 16 stories came out in magazines like *The Listener*, *Horizon* and *Cornhill* between 1941 and 1944, and were collected in *The Demon Lover* published in 1945, by which time she had written the first five chapters of her war novel, *The Heat of the Day* which shows wartime London's mysterious carnival tension and poetic beauty. Bowen showed the blitzed London's magical power and strange mood in the novel.

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. ...The diversion of traffic out of blocked main thoroughfares into by ways, the unstopping phantasmagoric streaming of lorries, buses, vans, drays, taxis past modest windows and quiet doorways set up an overpowering sense of London's organic power-somewhere here was a source from which heavy motion boiled, surged and, not to be damned up, forced for itself new channels. (*The Heat of the Day*, 90-91)<sup>2</sup>

The novel and the short stories contain some common quality of expressing "intensity of life" in

the Blitz; in them, the author shows a deep interest in people's triangle love-relationships and psychological changes during wartime. Arthur in "Mysterious Kor", an only soldier among all the stories, says, "They forget war's not only just war; it's years out of people's lives that they've never had before and won't have again." Bowen calls the stories "resistance" writing, meaning that cruelty and abnormality of war could influence on people's individual lives. However at the same time, she expressed positive fantastic power in blitzed London. Hallucinations can function as personal private spaces to escape, collective memory or dreams of people who share the experience of blitz, and a kind of clairvoyant or ghosts to show elusive past and future in Bowen's stories. She wrote she was surprised by what the short stories in *The Demon Lover* have in common each other, and it is like "an organic whole."<sup>3</sup> Bowen, who thinks the short story requires "poetic tautness and clarity" and allows for extremes, made use of the characteristics of a short story, and create its own unique world.

### **Ghosts as people's illusions**

In most of stories in *The Demon Lover*, people suffer from and irritate at loss of private space. People had to share one house, feeling claustrophobia and lack of privacy. Stephen Inwood stated the situation of London during 1939-1945 in *A History of London*:

The problem of fire was much greater than the government had anticipated, and the serious disruption caused to traffic, business and housing by unexploded and delayed action bombs had not been foreseen. Because Londoners did not die or flee in the numbers anticipated, the number of people without homes or furniture was much greater than the government had foreseen. Homelessness had not been a great issue in prewar planning. (Inwood, 789)<sup>4</sup>

The homeless people are faced with their own hallucinations in Bowen's short stories. The short stories in *The Demon Lover* are mostly ghost stories. In other words, the hallucinations include both definite ghosts, such as in "Pink May" and "The Cherry Soul", and invisible ghosts, dreams or fantasies in "The Happy Autumn Fields" and "Mysterious Kôr." Bowen pays the special attention to elements such as the setting and the atmosphere; ruined houses, London streets, or moonlight at midnight feature prominently. She occasionally added a supernatural element as a means of heightening the sense of atmosphere. Bowen created the supernatural out of psychological states. She persistently placed emphasis on the relationship between a particular place and the people that inhabit it. Her tales often explore the question; what do people who have reduced mental and physical means do in their bombed houses in London? The Anglo-Irish in their Big Houses shares their fate with the historical past of their families. The ruined houses in London during wartime, however, are almost empty of a sense of historical past, but they are a place of refuge full of personal hallucination drawn from each character's memory and past. Bowen wrote :

Almost all ghosts in these stories build themselves up out of the neuroses of those who see them –as though the seers had been selected prey. Indeed, often the ghosts are

nemesis-dragging buried guilt up, harping on broken faith, or driving a mortal offence home. (*Seven Winters and Afterthoughts*, 206-7)<sup>5</sup>

Bowen's ghosts are always psychological, the ghosts born out of "neurosis of those who see them." The ghosts are people's own illusion, taking revenge from their own past, imagination and memories, or letting people think back about their past, present and future.

### **The "Gothic" sense of Bowen's ghost stories**

Bowen's definition of ghost stories reminds us the "modern gothic" genre. Her stories, including her Anglo-Irish stories and her ghost stories, have a Gothic air. When we hear of "Gothic," we usually tend to think of "medieval castles," "beautiful women" and "bloody murder." By late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Gothic was commonly used to mean medieval, therefore barbarous in a largely unquestioned equation of civilization with classical standards. Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* set a standard of Gothic fiction; the merciless determination of the feudal tyrant to continue his family line, the threat of dynastic extinction, the confinement and persecution of a vulnerable heroine in a sinister labyrinthine building. These were to become the standard materials of Gothic tales as the tradition took shape. In 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, Sheridan Le Fanu had an honorable place in the process of developing the modern gothic writing. According to Chris Baldick, "in 20<sup>th</sup> century, it became possible to have a Gothic story set in the author's own time, dislodged from the specific association with the Middle Ages, if the tale focuses upon a relatively enclosed space in which some antiquated barbaric code still prevails."<sup>6</sup> Bowen, who admired Le Fanu, created the modern gothic stories. Her stories are set in small flats or empty bombed houses in the city of London in 20<sup>th</sup> century. The central character in "The Demon Lover", for example, a middle-aged woman tiring of her everyday-life during wartime, feels personal mental pain, "the tyranny of her personal past" within the shut-up house. Baldick wrote about the relationship between houses and Gothic fictions:

Gothic fiction is characteristically obsessed with old buildings as sites of human decay. The Gothic castle or house is not just as old and sinister building; it is a house of degeneration, even of decomposition, its living space darkening and contracting into the dying-space of the mortuary and the tomb... Doubling as both fictional setting and as dominant symbol, the house reverberates for us with associations, which are simultaneously psychological and historical. (Baldick, xx in *Introduction*)

Bowen's Court connoted the Bowen family's historical meaning that Bowen herself felt love and hate, and ruined houses in London Blitz reverberated with people's psychological associations. Bowen's fictional houses have their own connotations that make readers associate them with various things.

### **Ruined houses as people's psychological stages**

In Bowen's ghost stories, the characters see or feel "ghosts" or "illusions" in the closed small space, that spring from their own ideas of the past. Ruined houses often act as psychological

stages, because people have no elsewhere to go in bombed London. Bowen's fictional houses function as theatrical stages. Sigmund Freud's essay on "The Uncanny"<sup>7</sup> gives us the idea that the German word *heimlich*, which is the opposite of *unheimlich* ("uncanny" is used as the English rendering of *unheimlich*: literally "unhomely"), has two sets of meanings. *Heimlich* means the idea of "homelike," "belonging to the house," but at the same time the further idea is developed of "something withdrawn from the eyes of others," "something concealed." Houses should be the place where people living they feel easy and safe; however, from the eyes of the outside world the house plays the role of being cut off between inside and the outside. A house is a closed building, so it could play the role of a prison or a locked room that evokes the feeling of terrible claustrophobia. A house in Bowen's stories can function as a limited life-stage where the "uncanny" happens. Bowen spun her original modern Gothic ghost stories on the threads of her characters' minds, characters that make their own illusionary world in small-bombed houses, escaping from their own personal pasts and their present war-time situation. This essay will focus on the hallucinatory worlds especially in two short stories, "The Happy Autumn Fields" and "Mysterious Kôr."

## II. The condensed taste of two worlds in "The Happy Autumn Fields"

This story has a double setting; one is of a Victorian idyllic family and the other is of a woman in a bombed house in London. They are totally different settings both in time and space, which are strangely mixed in this story. It means that the greater part of the story consists of the dreams of the woman named Mary in bombed London. Her dream is about the happy big wealthy family's one day sketch in Victorian time. Mary's trance-like state has been induced by a few old photographs that she found in the ruined house. Her evocation of a Victorian family probably in Ireland has in fact a wealth of concrete detail, in contrast of the frame of the story, which presents Mary's wartime London existence.

### The vision of "Happy Autumn Fields"

The first scene is the family walking in the big cornfields that they own in the autumn.

The family walking party, though it comprised so many, did not deploy or straggle over the stubble but kept in a procession of threes and twos. (671)<sup>8</sup>

According to Otto Rauchbauer, the walk of the family over the estate was itself emblematic of an almost 18<sup>th</sup> century sense of hierarchy and pride in surveying one's possessions. The family-walking scene is filled with the nostalgic Victorian mood.

Sarah recognized the colour of valediction, tasted sweet sadness, while from the cottage inside the screen of trees wood-smoke rose melting pungent and blue. This was the eve of the brothers' return to school. (672)

The melancholy Victorian world is coloured by the beauty of the natural world, and expressed by

the five-senses. We feel the silent vivid scene as if we are seeing, smelling and tasting nature. Sarah and Henrietta are the central characters in the Victorian world. They are very close young sisters who sleep together, share each other's thoughts. Henrietta says Sarah, "But I cannot forget that you chose to be born without me; that you would not wait." However Henrietta's heart broke so that she noticed her sister's first love to Eugene, their brother's friend.

So each without looking trembled before an image, while slow colour burned up the curves of her cheeks. The consummation would be when their eyes met.

At the other side of the horse, Henrietta began to sing. At once her pain, like a scientific ray, passed through the horse and Eugene to penetrate Sarah's heart. (675)

The hidden sad love story and Henrietta's ominous "scientific ray" dim and mystify the Victorian family story. After five pages about the family, we suddenly meet Mary in a bombed room in London. We realize that the Victorian nostalgic scene was Mary's dream.

From somewhere else in the hollowness came a cascade of hammering. Close up, a voice: ' Oh, awake, Mary?' It came from the other side of the open door, which jutted out between herself and the speaker- he on the threshold, she lying on the uncovered mattress of a bed. (676)

Hermoine Lee says, "The language used is violently changed from Victorian time to wartime London. Mary was surrounded by sounds of hammering and someone thumping a piano and wreckage- plaster, dust, calico tacked over the windows. She urgently wanted to be back to her Victorian dreams, keeping away her lover Travis who wanted to take her from the dangerous house." Her consciousness has already moved back to her next dreams while her body is left in the bombed house. In other words, half of Mary already has gone back to her dream. Mary's dream, the compensation for "the anaesthetized and bewildered present" begins to invade her reality. As expected, the next scene is back to the Victorian time. The family is back from the fields into the inside of their Big House. The red room was filled with flowery and fruity smells. The tips of ferns curled gold and red scented geranium and the carpet with wreath of pomegranates were colorfully decorated in the warm room. The warm visual and scented senses imply youth of Henrietta and Sarah, closeness and peace in the family. However, we could begin feeling a little wave motion – a disturbance in the room- from the words "tottering", "vibration" and "quiver." The room itself is like trembling. A little crack also in the idyllic atmosphere shows from Sarah's thoughts and Henrietta's jealous to Eugene. Sarah thought "the feeling of dislocation, the formless dread that had been with her since she had been what she must call her dream." While she felt fear, "the shred of geranium fell to the carpet." Something in the room has changed as the magic of the happiness dissolved. Sarah prophesied, "Something terrible may be going to happen tomorrow." It turned out in the final paragraph that according to the old papers in the bombed London that Henrietta and Sarah apparently died young, and Sarah's love, Eugene seemed to be killed accidentally by falling the horse "tomorrow" on the way from the house. The day in this Big House might be the last day of the happy family memories. There is

full of mystery about the death of Eugene because we cannot forget Henrietta's "scientific ray" which can have the power to cut Sarah away from Eugene. In the final scene, we came back to Mary awakened again in her ruined room. Mary screamed, as the house "rocked; simultaneously the calico window split and more ceiling fell." The cracked dream seems to stream into the realistic world of the bombed house. The image is loss of self; hollowness of self. However the cruel situation of Mary was obscured by the elegiac epilogue of Victorian sisters. The condensed mood of the two worlds sublime to the sense of eternal beauty in the golden scene of happy autumn fields.

### **The overlap between memory and imagination**

It is not clear if the scenes of the Victorian world in Mary's dream is her mere fantasy or a part of true history or not. There is some ambiguous power, supernatural magic in the story. The idea of being passively entered into by the past or the memory or the fantasy is derived from Proust, who has always interested Bowen. Bowen wrote, "Memory is, as Proust has it, so oblique and selective that no doubt I see my schooldays through a subjective haze." Mary's dream should be subjective and selective, which is made by her fear, hope and hallucination. Bachelard said:

The image is created through co-operation between the real and unreal, with the help of the functions of the real and the unreal.. if a house is a living value, it must integrate an element of unreality. All values must remain vulnerable, and those that do not are dead. (Bachelard, 59)<sup>10</sup>

The surreal quality of this story is Bowen's particular skill. The overlap between imagination and memory makes this story a different kind of ghost story. The fantasy has attraction full of surreal beauty and at the same time smells of truth in life.

### **III. Homeless people in moonlight city London in "Mysterious Kôr"**

#### **The vision of moonlight-city**

There is a single strong image in "Mysterious Kôr." The image is illuminated by the unreal quality of London brightly lit by moonlight.

Full moonlight drenched the city and searched it; there was not a niche left to stand in... London looked like the moon's capital – shallow, cratered, extinct. (728)

This moon seems to be patrolling London, looking down at people who have nowhere to go, and it plays the role of a quiet master- hand in this story. The moon "drenched London" has unreal magical image rendered by some peculiar sentences.

It was late, but now yet midnight; now the buses had stopped the polished roads and streets in this region sent for minutes together a ghostly unbroken reflection up. (728)

The full moon lit image in the opening scene possesses the whole story, which creates an unreal atmosphere in bombed London. We feel as if we are looking down on the whole city from the eye of the moon; from the sky. London watched from the moon is like something scary; the magical space of another planet.

In wartime, even in Britain, much has been germinating. What, I do not know who does, yet, know?- but I felt the germination; and felt it, here and there, in these stories now that I read them through. (*CI*, 52)

We can feel a sense of “germination” from the moon in the story. The germination gives this story the magical power and attraction. The eye of the moon is gradually focused on one couple who “by their way of walking, seemed to have no destination but each other and to be not quite certain even of that.” There are three characters apart from the moon in this story: the young couple, Pepita and Arthur and their friend Callie. Arthur was a soldier who was on the first night of his leave, but they had nowhere to go except for Pepita’s small flat that she shared with Callie. They wanted to be alone so they delayed coming back to the flat where Callie was waiting to welcome Arthur. Walking together in moonlit London, Pepita told Arthur that “Mysterious Kôr” was “a completely forsaken city, as high as cliffs and as white as bones with no history.” She dreamt to be in Kôr with Arthur in bombed London “without any hope of any place of their own.” Kôr is in fact the lost city described in *She* by Rider Haggard. Bowen wrote that in her childhood *She* was ‘historic’ moment for her in its ‘violent impact’ on her. In *She*, the mysterious white queen of a Central African tribe, whose dread title, *She-who-must be obeyed*, testifies to her undying beauty and magical powers, she rules the lost city, Kôr. Bowen in her essay on Kôr, says:

I saw Kôr before I saw London; I was a provincial child... I was inclined to see London as Kôr with the roofs still on. The idea that life in any capital city must be ephemeral, and with a doom ahead, remained with me – a curious obsession for an Edwardian child...*She*, the book, glutted my imagination with images and pictures of which I could not, it seemed, have enough. (*SW*, 233)

For Bowen, therefore, Kôr is identified with London. We have to take into account the tensions of war in London at that time. Arthur is returning to battle; Pepita may never see him again. This night may be their last meeting. Every moment is counted and precious under the spell of the moon. The moon removes colour from landscape, which makes everything equal, everything black, grey or white. It is a landscape of magic, of unreality, of death. The city, lit brightly, is in danger of being easily bombed. So London under the moonlight is full of the terrible tensions of the war mixing with the lovers’ intense feelings towards their vulnerable future. The tension is reinforced by the image of Kôr that is unreal lost city, ruled by a beautiful, but destructive and deadly woman. In the city of the unreal under the spell of the moon, only the little flat represents life and a refuge for the lovers.

### **Callie's dream**

However Callie is there, Pepita's girl friend, who shares "a two-roomed flatlet." Callie was the opposite type of "secretive, as self-centered, as little half-grown black cat" Pepita. Callie was so "sedate, waxy and tall" like "unlit candle on sale outside church." Pepita felt every moment might be her last with Arthur, however they cannot be alone. Callie is a reality in their flat. Pepita and Arthur have to face the reality in the small flat, hiding the intense feeling. "Brotherless virgin" Callie shrank from sharing the flat with a young man, but waiting to welcome Arthur. She did not have another place to stay, either, and at the same time she wanted to see Arthur.

Callie's innocence and her still unsought-out state had brought her to take a proprietary pride in Arthur; this was all the stronger, perhaps, because they had not yet met. Sharing the flat with Pepita, this last year, she had been content with reflecting the heat of love. (732)

Callie was thinking about Arthur through Pepita's eyes and creating her own vision of Arthur. However she felt beginning to "wither in her, a flower of the heart that had bloomed too early" and "the hominess was now evaporating." Callie herself made her own illusion of the happy home with Pepita and Arthur tonight in the small flat. The illusion began to vanish, as the couple still do not come.

### **The poetic, but ironic ending**

At the end of the story, "the moon's power over London and the imagination had now declined. The siege of light had relaxed; the search was over; the street had a look of survival and no more." That night in bombed London is like another world being powerfully or even violently ruled by the moonlight, where the moonlight casts its magical spell on three characters. They all dreamt their own dream worlds, and their visions are different and even collide with each other. People were isolated but brought together by the same moonlight. So the decline of moonlight means that the danger and the tension of the city become less as the magic of moonlight dissolves. The final scene ends with Pepita's dream of going to Kôr with Arthur.

With him she looked this way, that way, down the wide, void pure streets, between statues, pillars and shadows, through archways and colonnades. With him she went up the stairs down which nothing but moon came; with him trod the ermine dust of the endless halls, stood on terraces mounted the extreme tower, looked down on the statted squares, the wide, void, pure streets. He was the password, but not the answer: it was to Kôr's finality that she turned. (739-740)

This beautiful poetic vision such as moon desert is Pepita's hallucination of Kôr. In the small flat, an only place of refuge, she cannot sleep with Arthur. Even Arthur, who may never come back alive, is no more her "password" for her salvation. The safe place of her mind is only in her



sad sweet dream of mysterious Kôr. The situation seems tragic and desperate, but at the same time the practicality of three people, who are skeptical each other, sleeping together in the small flat can be seen as a scene of social comedy. The small flat should be an only shelter for the lovers in wartime, but Callie is there. The ironic reality prevents the lovers from being alone. The Bowenesque comic sense is sharp and sour. The hallucination of Pepita in the ending may be preferable to the comic reality with the deep ironic tone. We have double vision to the poetic but ironic ending of the story.

#### IV. Conclusion

Elizabeth Bowen, who felt “intensity of life” herself in blitzed London, created hallucinatory worlds born from personal repression and collective memory in wartime in her 40’s short stories. Her hallucinations are sometimes visible or invisible ghosts with gothic air, and sometimes elusive unconscious fantasy or dreams of people who try to compensate for losses of their minds. The places such as ruined houses, small flats, Big Houses and deserted moon city, are all mirrors of the hallucinations of people in wartime London. Elizabeth Bowen, who put the great value on the sense of the past and the place, used the strange magical mood in blitzed London and made for various hallucinations in her stories.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *Collected Impressions*, London: Longmans, 1950, 42-43.

<sup>2</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *The Heat of the Day*, London: Penguin, 1949, 90-91.

<sup>3</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *Collected Impressions*, London: Longmans, 1950, 45.

<sup>4</sup> Inwood, Stephen. *A History of London*, London: Macmillan, 1998, 789. Inwood also states that when the realities of war replaced speculation and prediction, it became clear that some problems had been exaggerated, while others had been overlooked. The gas masks produced and issued in such vast numbers were never needed, and Londoners soon stopped carrying them. The empty hospital beds and the mass graves were not filled, because the London civilian casualties for the whole war (29,890 killed and about 50,000 badly injured) were fewer than the number that just a few days of bombing had been expected to produce. There was no mass hysteria or general loss of nerve, and the troops standing by to control the panicking crowds were moved to other duties.

<sup>5</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *Seven Winters and Afterthoughts*, New York: Alfred.A.Knopf, 1962, 206-207.

<sup>6</sup> Baldick, Chris. *Gothic Tales*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. Baldick summarizes a Gothic story in his introduction; Gothic tale will invoke the tyranny of the past ( a family curse, the survival of archaic forms of despotism and of superstition) with such weight as to stifle the hopes of the present ( the liberty of the heroine or hero) within the dead-end of physical incarnation. (the dungeon, the locked room, or simply the confinements of a family house closing in upon itself)

<sup>7</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*, translated by David McIntock, London: Penguin, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Bowen, Elizabeth. *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*, London: Penguin, 1983.

<sup>9</sup> Lee, Hermione. *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation*, London: Barnes and Noble Books, 1981.

<sup>10</sup> Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*, Boston: Boston Press, 1957, 59.

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