

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Heat of the Day (1949)

Elizabeth Bowen

Overview

The Heat of the Day examines loyalty and love among ordinary citizens in London during World War II. It follows the lives of Stella Rodney and her lover, Robert Kelway, as their bond is tested by Harrison, a British Intelligence officer who traps Stella into helping him prove Robert is a spy for Germany. The novel questions the very nature of treason and the limits of nation in the face of bombs and suspicion. The intrigue crosses national and familial borders with the inheritance of Mount Morris, an estate in Ireland that Stella's son now owns after the death of a distant relative. Through complex blood lines and allegiances the only constant element is that Harrison is always watching.

Literary/Historical

Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973) was an Anglo-Irish writer. She was born in Dublin but moved to England as a child, often travelling between the two nations. Published in 1949, *The Heat of the Day* is set in 1942 amid World War II in London. Though a spy novel at its heart, it takes many of its elements from Bowen's own life. She was in England's Ministry of Information during the War and reported on Ireland and its neutrality for Britain. Bowen draws on her own experience in this novel and provides a glimpse of the daily life of citizens surviving German bombardments. Mandated blackouts change the way of life for everyone. This is a population that has already lived through World War I. They are exhausted by war and surrounded by death and uncertainty. Bowen's novel illustrates the toll the war takes, not just on soldiers, but on the civilian population as well.

Main Characters

Stella Rodney - Stella is an independent woman who, having divorced her husband Victor, has raised her son, Roderick, on her own since Victor's death and is navigating the new realities of wartime London.

Roderick Rodney - Roderick is Stella's twenty-year-old son, who is in the British Army and unexpectedly inherits a house in southern Ireland from his cousin Frankie.

Robert Harrison – Known as 'Harrison', he is a shadowy figure who works for the British government. He first appears at Cousin Frankie's funeral and uses Stella to out Robert Kelway as a German spy.

Robert Kelway - Robert is Stella's lover and an officer in the British Army. He is at the center of Harrison's investigation and has been using his position to spy for Germany.

Louie Lewis - Louie leads a parallel life to Stella, navigating wartime London alone, while her husband, Thomas, is at war. She is a member of the working class and her life with her friend Connie provides a different perspective on wartime London.

Plot:

Watching the watcher The opening scene introduces us to Louie Lewis, a woman alone in Regent's Park watching an orchestra play. Her husband, Tom, is away at the front and she is sitting alone observing the crowds in the park. She spots Harrison, whose odd behaviors and inattention to the music draw her in. Despite her efforts, Louie is unable to garner his attention. Therefore, Harrison becomes an intriguing figure for her whose image she can't shake.

Harrison's proposition Leaving the park, Harrison makes his way to Stella Rodney's apartment. Stella is surprised to see him there since they are not friends or even acquaintances. She has only met him at a recent funeral and is unsure why he's in her apartment. He intimates that her lover, Robert, may be involved in unsavory and potentially traitorous activity but is not forthcoming with a full explanation.

Harrison proposes that Stella "liquidates" Robert; that she leaves him and enters a relationship with himself, without tipping Robert off that he is being watched. If she agrees to this arrangement, no harm will come to Robert. Harrison, the counterspy, frames the proposal as if she, Stella, is in charge of what happens both to Robert and to the nation. Harrison's cagey attitude throughout this whole episode obscures his true intentions. Stella is uncertain if he is truly looking for her to be his mistress or testing her loyalty.

Frankie's funeral and Wisteria Lodge The encounter with Harrison leaves Stella rattled and she remembers she saw him at the funeral of Francis Morris, her ex-husband's cousin. Francis, known as 'Cousin Frankie', had died unexpectedly during a visit to his wife, Nettie, at her care facility, Wisteria Lodge in London. Cousin Frankie was visiting from Ireland when he died and, because of the war and the complexity of transporting his body, a hasty and sparsely attended funeral was held in London. The few family members at the funeral noticed there were strangers in attendance, including Harrison, but assumed they were from Wisteria Lodge.

Even though Stella and Victor had not been married since Roderick was a baby, Cousin Frankie considered Roderick to be his heir. Accordingly, he left his estate in southern Ireland to Roderick along with the cryptic note: "In the hope that he may care in his own way to carry on the old tradition".

Stella visits Robert's family home Stella takes in what Harrison has told her concerning Robert but continues her life as if all was normal. Together with Robert, Stella visits Holme Dene, Robert's childhood home in southern England. We get a view of Robert as the head of the family, despite being the youngest. His sister Ernestine takes care of his mother, Mrs. Kelway, known to her family as Muttikins and his niece and nephew, children of his other sister, Amabelle, who is in India where her husband is stationed. There is no warmth in this house. Ernestine is authoritative and emotionless, while her mother is a woman hardened by years of holding the family together. Robert's childhood room is full of photos like a mausoleum and the house, which was to be temporary, has remained unchanged since his father's death.

Harrison appears at Stella's doorstep When Stella returns from her visit to Holme Dene, Harrison is already waiting for her on the doorstep. Stella confirms she hasn't tipped her hand and has only asked Robert if he knows Harrison. For his part, Harrison is making his presence known and making sure that Stella is aware that he is watching her every move.

Louie and Connie carve out a living Harrison connects the two plotlines. Louie is back at the park searching in vain for Harrison. While Tom is away as a soldier, she is trying to carve out a new life in the city. Connie is a welcome friend in her solitude. Connie is an Air Raid Precautions Warden, and Louie works in a factory. Their lives are emblematic of the lives of women during wartime when many of the men are away at the front and everyday rhythms at home are turned upside down.

Stella's trip to Ireland Stella goes to Mount Morris to check on the house that Roderick has inherited. She has not visited in years, since her honeymoon with Victor, and Roderick has never seen the house at all. Yet, the house feels familiar and is a welcome break from London.

One of the groundskeepers mentions that there has been a man who regularly visited Cousin Frankie. Stella quickly realizes the man is Harrison and there is a reason he was at the funeral. She thinks there must be something that Harrison kept visiting Frankie to learn. At this moment, Stella starts to believe that Harrison might be telling her the truth about Robert.

Robert proposes to Stella Robert picks Stella up on her way home from Ireland. She confronts Robert and asks if he's been passing information to the enemy. He deflects the question and takes offense that she could ever think that he was capable of such a thing. Through all this, he never outright denies her accusation.

Following the car ride, they go to dinner where Robert says, "If anyone is to marry, why not us?" Given the course of their recent conversations and their relationship up to now, Stella declines saying, "We have got into the way of not marrying, I suppose... There doesn't seem to be much to marry for, at the moment, does there?" Marrying him is not her aim and his proposal is oddly timed.

Roderick visits Wisteria Lodge Roderick is eager to learn more about his inheritance and goes to visit Cousin Frankie's wife Nettie at Wisteria Lodge. Nettie welcomes him warmly and talks about Mount Morris and her memories there, including those of his father, Victor. She laments that Victor should never have left Stella for the nurse who treated him after World War I. Roderick is stunned by this news because Stella had shouldered all the blame for the divorce and let everyone, including Roderick, believe she was the one who had left.

As Stella explains to Harrison later, she let everyone think she was responsible because "[w]ho, at the age I was, would not rather sound a monster than look a fool?"

Harrison's suspicions about Robert are confirmed Back in London, Harrison and Stella are sharing information in a restaurant. Harrison tells Stella he knew that she must have said something to Robert about his possible espionage when she returned from Ireland as he did exactly what Harrison predicted. The morning after she returned, Robert changed his habits and altered his routines hoping, as Harrison believes, to avoid detection.

Louie interrupts Stella and Harrison's dinner From across the restaurant, Louie recognizes Harrison from the park and motions to him. Harrison tries to ignore her, but using a loose dog as a ruse, Louie approaches their table. Louie wants to sate her curiosity, and Stella uses Louie as a distraction so her conversation about Robert can come to an end. Stella thinks she has outsmarted Harrison in tipping off Robert without revealing all that she knew. Louie walks Stella home in the dark.

Louie's analysis of Harrison Though Louie has been fascinated to learn more about Harrison with his air of mystery, after her interaction with him at the restaurant, she hoped never to encounter him again. His gruff demeanor immediately repulsed her. She is confused as to why someone as refined as Stella would keep company with the likes of Harrison.

Holme Dene intrigue While Stella is at dinner, Robert gets a panicked call from his sister. Someone made an offer to buy their house, Holme Dene. The house has been on the real estate agent's books for years and they received an offer out of the blue. No one has looked at the house or inquired about it, but someone has made the offer anyway. Robert refrains from really engaging with Ernestine and his mother as they think through the logistics. Given the timing of the offer and the intrigue that surrounds Robert, it is never made clear who made the offer.

The telephone rings amid the family's debate. They all theorize who could be calling at such a late hour, but do not actually answer the phone. The call rattles Robert and for the first time he is afraid that his last moments will be in Holme Dene and that he'll never see Stella again.

Explanation Stella finally receives an explanation from Robert that yes, he has been giving information to the enemy. However, 'enemy' is not a simple category for Robert. He fought and was wounded at Dunkirk. He has seen the futility of his sacrifice and his uselessness upon his return. He thinks there's only one side—his own side. The concepts of country, black and white, good or evil, are far too simplistic for Robert who lives a life of contradictions. For her part, Stella is brokenhearted, not only because of his

actions against England, but also because he has changed her view of him and that he never let her into a part of his life. He has irreparably broken the bond she thought they had.

Robert's demise Through this intense conversation, Robert grows paranoid that Harrison and his associates are waiting for him outside Stella's flat. They decide his only way to leave and remain unseen is to head to the roof and find a way down from there. Stella helps him up through the landing skylight. They part knowing their relationship is over and Robert must flee.

Whether he fell due to his injury from Dunkirk or he jumped is unknown, but Robert's lifeless body was found in the street below on the same morning that Montgomery's troops vanquished the Italians and Germans in North Africa.

Roderick in Ireland Roderick finally gets to see the house at Mount Morris. There he contemplates his own mortality. For the first time he ponders what would happen if he did not return from the war. He turns his thoughts to his three fathers: "the defeated Victor, the determining Cousin Francis, the unadmitted stepfather Robert". All three had died unexpectedly and "meanwhile, the Fortress of Europe was waiting to be stormed by Roderick". Stella is Roderick's only blood relation. She is the last one standing through all the grief, the secrets, and the danger of war. Yet, when Stella was there, she envisioned Roderick in that home with his wife and could imagine him living there peacefully. Roderick chooses to change his perspective on Mount Morris and make his own future without falling into the pattern of his predecessors. He is making the decision that Cousin Frankie's note meant "that he may care in his own way, to carry on the old tradition."

Harrison reappears Following Robert's death, Harrison disappeared from London but reappears unexpectedly at Stella's new flat amid the renewed bombardment of the city. He tells her "I never did expect you to do anything for nothing". His menacing plans were just that, plans, he had not thought through what acting on his desire for Stella would mean. Their meeting is their final goodbye and an end to their entanglement.

Louie's fate Louie, whose husband Tom has been at the front and away from home, realizes she is pregnant. She worries about telling Tom and what he might think, but she receives word that he had died at the front, never knowing Louie's secret. Louie and Connie go on with their lives. Louie names her son Thomas Victor— 'Thomas' after her husband, while 'Victor' is, coincidentally, the name of Roderick's also deceased father. An ill-fated name that leaves the future of this world uncertain.

Themes

Darkness There is a blackout mandated for London, which was under a strict order for the duration of the war (1939-1945). From sunset to sundown, citizens were ordered to cover their windows and extinguish any light that may help bombers find their targets. These precautions did not stop the German bombing blitz of 1940 that heavily damaged the city, but the order remained in place for the duration of the war. Stella and the other citizens of the city move through the dark of night by memory. Inside their homes, they have grown accustomed to moving in the dark. Room darkening curtains keep any light from seeping outside and flashlights are used sparingly to guide the way.

This darkness is mirrored in the opacity of the narration. The intrigue is thick, the story never clear and the reader is only given pieces of conversations or innuendos to piece together.

Bowen brings these elements together when Robert discloses his actions and motivations to Stella. In that scene, Stella does not want to hear the truth from Robert and tries to leave the room to avoid his story.

"Who am I to say?" "You say you know what you know." "But that's all I do know." ...Without answering, she was groping over the panels of the door...She switched on a lamp, but then stood recoiling from it, fingers over her eyes. She had then to turn and shut the door behind her, so that lamplight from here should not travel through to the bedroom window Robert had uncurtained. In her infestation by all ideas of delinquency, any offence against the black-out seemed to her punishable by death...

Bowen connects the darkness of blackout to Stella's aversion to elucidating Robert's treasonous actions. She switches on the light and acts quickly to extinguish it before it could seep through the doorway and

through the bedroom window. While this is happening, Robert is trying to explain his actions. Like the bedroom window that he has uncurtained, he has pulled the curtains away from his previously secret actions. Stella is consumed by the thought that she has broken the blackout order, yet this preoccupation keeps her from thinking about the truth of Robert's actions, ones that are actually punishable by death.

Trauma of War The war is a constant presence in the novel. The men are in the army, the women are serving on the home front. Roderick, Robert, and Harrison are all officers in the British army. Stella works for the war office. Ernestine, Robert's sister, is part of the Voluntary Aid Detachment. Connie is an Air Raid Captain. Louie works in a factory while her husband is off at the front. The entire civilian population contributes to the war effort.

The scent of death hangs over the novel. Husbands, siblings, uncles, parents, have all died and the constant bombardment of London makes even the most mundane of activities a threat. Every phone call and telegram may hold the news that another loved one has died. "There began to be an instinctive movement to break down indifference while there was still time. The wall between the living and the living became less solid as the wall between the living and the dead thinned...Strangers saying "Goodnight, 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 to die unknown". The trauma of war extends to the civilian population, and they are desperate for connection, any connection, between each other.

Home Outside of the novel, the predominant narrative about World War II is that there is a clear division between good and evil, the axis powers and the allies. Bowen, however, complicates this idea and questions the notion of country and allegiance. Bowen herself was a member of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, Irish according to a passport, but culturally English. Already, the idea of borders and nations is far from simple.

Bowen configures home, not as country or nation, but instead as the place where one feels safe and at peace. Roderick's inheritance of Mount Morris is in Ireland and gives him roots and a place to call his own without regard to national borders. Stella and Robert's relationship is unusual in many ways, but "Robert became a safe haven for Stella". He is where she feels safest. "What the inheritance came to be for Roderick, Robert was for Stella — a habitat."

Robert feels the same way about Stella, and this feeling of connection is at the core of why Robert does not see himself as treasonous and why Stella feels most betrayed by his lack of disclosure of his actions to her. Robert explains his reasoning to Stella during their final meeting. "I don't see what you mean... Country? — there are no more countries left; nothing but names. What country have you and I outside this room?...you have been my country".

Character Analysis

Stella Rodney Stella is an enigmatic figure. She has spent her life taking care of her son, Roderick, independently. She and Roderick's father, Victor, divorced when Roderick was small. She never remarried and she is now in a relationship with Robert. She made her life as she saw fit without regards to what was expected of her.

Enigmatic Stella is a hard person to read. She rarely shows emotion and holds her cards close to her chest. Her conversations with Harrison, an expert counterspy, seem like a duel, a challenge as to who can reveal the least amount of information. In the following exchange, Bowen illustrates their duel not only in their manner of speaking, but also in their facial expressions:

"Oh, I expect so," said Stella with her most idle air. She soon, however, dropped into staring at him with an accumulation of weariness, distaste, mistrust, boredom, most of all the strain of her own sustained ungentleness and forced irony. Hesitating, he touched his moustache — as though it concealed a spring which could make his mouth fly open on something final. She was looked at narrowly.

Stella never tells the complete story. Even as far back as her divorce, she let people believe she had been the one to leave Victor when it was the other way around. Controlling information and crafting the narrative is a source of power for Stella. Her inscrutability protects her.

Independent Stella eschews every expectation of her. Bowen upends the traditional marriage plot in creating a character for whom marriage is never the desire or end goal. Stella's life is her own. Robert is her lover and, if not for Roderick's feelings, they would have lived together, unmarried, in the 1940s. She rejects Robert's proposal and sees no reason to marry. Her refusal to be pinned down is a consistent theme in her life. She lives alone, stays in London despite the bombings, and never doubts her instincts. A conversation Roderick has with Donovan, the caretaker of Mount Morris, reveals Stella's essence. Donovan is curious why Roderick has left Stella in London where the bombing has started up again. Roderick dismisses his concerns and replies that "she's always done what she wants". Despite her toughness and her independence, she has always remained kind. As Donovan replies, "I should say she'd always done what she could. Whatever she went through, she's very gentle". Stella, strong and resilient, is the one still standing when many of the men around her have fallen.

Harrison Harrison is surrounded by intrigue. No one in the novel can quite place him, and no one seems sure that they know him at all. He does little to assuage the rumors about his origins and he is very tightlipped with any information about himself. His mannerisms and way of speaking are also off-putting and keep him aloof from others.

Inscrutable Louie's observations of Harrison provide the most objective view of this specimen of men. At the opening of the novel, Louie watches this curious creature, a man she has never seen before at a concert in the park. She tries to decipher his movements and immediately notes that the way he is watching others in the park goes beyond looking and observing. His observations are purposeful, and he can't help but attribute a reason to every behavior: "So strong had become his habit of mind that he saw no behaviour as being apart from motive, and any motive as worth examining twice". Louie is applying this same logic to Harrison in trying to ascribe a motive to his strange actions, and this is perhaps what draws the two together. "His and her eyes met with what was already familiarity; her pertinacity and his rudeness having created a sort of bond between them". His role as a counterspy has infected every fiber of his being. His own motives are unknown to those around him, and he will keep them that way.

Inhuman In his intensity, there is also a lack of humanity, some piece of his being is missing. Again, Louie's observations give us the best view of Harrison. She runs into him again, when he's out with Stella, and Louie immediately gets a bad feeling about him. She "simultaneously felt he could never suffer and wished he might. It was not so much that she could not forgive him as that he seemed to her born to repulse forgiveness, with indeed all things else: tonight's most strong impression had been that in all Harrison there was no place in which to receive anything." He is incapable of true emotion and, therefore, incapable of feeling true hurt or loss. He is like a ghost who appears and disappears at will while causing suffering to those around him.