

The Heat of the Day (1990)

Christopher Morahan

OVERVIEW

Director Christopher Morahan (1929-2017) was a television and theatre director and producer. He won a Primetime Emmy and a BAFTA TV award for his work on the 1985 miniseries *The Jewel in the Crown*. *The Heat of the Day* appeared as a TV movie at the tail end of Morahan's career. The film stars Michael Gambon who has over 150 acting credits and was already a familiar face on the small screen when this film was made.

Film The film is adapted from Elizabeth Bowen's 1949 novel of the same name. The film examines loyalty and the nation during World War II. Stella Rodney (Patricia Hodge) is at the centre of an espionage plot wherein she is being watched by Harrison (Michael Gambon), a British Intelligence officer. He is looking to get evidence on her lover Robert (Michael York), a member of the British army, who is providing information to Germany.

Background The novel on which the film is based, *The Heat of the Day*, was published in 1949 and set in 1942, during World War II and the German bombing of London. There is a blackout mandated for London, which was under a strict order for the duration of the war. 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 rest of the war. The darkness plays into the film as Stella and the other citizens of London need to navigate the city at night without lights of any kind.

CINEMATIC NARRATION

The cinematography in *The Heat of the Day* is often from the perspective of surveillance. When Harrison is on-screen, shots are often filmed from over his shoulder, as if the audience is part of his stake-out. We see images of Stella through a camera lens, and the black and white photos of both her and Robert are hung on Harrison's wall as evidence. These shots remind the audience that this film, at its heart, is a spy movie. Harrison is the hunter and Robert and Stella are his prey.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Stella Rodney	Stella is a self-assured and independent woman who finds herself caught between her lover and loyalty to her country.
Robert Kelway	Robert is a British soldier engaged in treason while under surveillance by MI5.
Harrison	Harrison is a British Intelligence officer who uses Stella to entrap her lover, Robert, who is providing information to Germany.
Roderick Rodney	Roderick is Stella's son, who is in the British army and inherits Cousin Frankie's estate in Ireland.
Francis Morris "Cousin Frankie"	Cousin Frankie is the cousin of Stella's ex-husband, Victor.

SYNOPSIS

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 that Robert is a spy for Germany. The novel questions the very nature of treason and the limits of national loyalty in the face of destruction and suspicion.

The intrigue crosses national and familial borders through 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.

PLOT

Surveillance - We are introduced to Stella and Robert through photos taken as surveillance. The couple is being followed. The watcher is omnipresent, and the viewer does not yet know if the watcher or Stella and Rodney are in danger.

Stella meets Harrison at a funeral – Cousin Francis lived in Ireland but died in England. His death far away from home meant a sparsely attended funeral. Therefore, Stella's arrival is noticed by all since the funeral is populated by her ex-husband's family, none of whom she has seen in years. Her conspicuous entrance is also noticed by Harrison, the watcher, who is seated in the back of the church. None of the other mourners know who Harrison is or why he might be there, yet he approaches Stella with confidence. He knows that her ex-husband was Francis' cousin, that Roderick is her son, and that Roderick has inherited Mount Morris, Francis' estate in Ireland. He also knows that Roderick will inherit the estate despite Roderick never having met Francis and that Stella herself hasn't been to Mount Morris since her honeymoon years ago with Roderick's father.

Harrison in the park - We see Harrison outside of his role as Intelligence officer and outside of Stella's orbit. He is waiting in a park. Even though there is a concert in the park, he is distracted and not paying attention to anything around him. He is fixated on his work even during otherwise normal activities. He warns Louie, a woman who is in the park at the same time, that she "should be a bit more careful who [she] know[s]..." His presence is ominous.

Harrison's proposal and blackmail - After leaving Louie in the park, Harrison makes his way to Stella's flat. Stella is waiting for him and is on guard to what he might say after their initial meeting at Frankie's funeral. Once he arrives, Harrison reveals his true intentions and his sinister goals. He tells Stella that he has been watching Robert and knows he has been giving information to the enemy. However, he hasn't sent any of this information to his superiors. If Stella complies with his demands—that she leave Robert for him—he won't report Robert. As he explains to Stella, "I could tip the scales either way, the thing could turn on the stuff I send up or don't send up. What happens to him depends on me, and when I say me I mean you. What happens to him depends on you." Stella does not accept his demands and replies indignantly, "I'm to sleep with you, in order that a man be left free to go on selling his country?" Harrison replies, "If you sink me, you sink him." The onus is on Stella to save Robert and let him continue giving information to Germany, or to inform on him and lose him, but save the nation.



Harrison follows Stella - Stella returns from the visit with Robert's family to find Harrison already waiting for her outside her flat. He wants to know if she has yet said anything to Robert, though he already knows. He knows Stella is thinking about his offer as her voice is different on the phone that he's tapping. He explains that he started to have feelings about her while observing her habits of meeting with Robert.

Harrison's connection to Ireland - Since Roderick is occupied with his role in the Army, Stella goes to Mount Morris in Ireland to inspect his new inheritance. The bucolic setting and quiet atmosphere is a far cry from her life in London. Stella learns that Harrison has been here quite a few times to visit Francis. This previous relationship explains why he was at the funeral and gives credence to his suspicions about Robert. Stella is beginning to put the picture together on her own.



Robert's origins- Stella meets Robert's family for the first time. She does not receive a warm welcome. It's clear the family takes the war effort seriously. They often compare London to the shortages and rations they are managing far outside the city at their home, Holme Dene. Robert's sister, Ernestine, is rushing about never taking off her uniform for her work on the home front. Robert's childhood room is full of photographs on the wall as if the room was a mausoleum. Stella never mentions Harrison's suspicions.

Stella tells Robert about Harrison's allegations- Stella reveals that she has heard from Harrison that Robert is "passing information to the enemy." He denies it and gets angry at Stella for not trusting him and believing Harrison instead. Robert asks Stella if they should get married. "I can't bear you out of my sight!" Robert declares. Stella is reluctant to agree as she doesn't need to be looked after and refuses his marriage proposal as she believes he's only asking her so she can soothe his wounded honour or prove to him that she believes he's innocent.



Harrison becomes aware that Stella talked to Robert- Robert gets called away for an emergency at his family's home outside of the city. Meanwhile Harrison has appeared at Stella's flat again. He knows she has tipped Robert off because he has noticed that Robert has changed his habits immediately, indicating that Robert is trying to elude detection. Stella is taken aback that he can pinpoint exactly when she talked to Robert because of his movements. Her belief that Robert is guilty is beginning to take root. Harrison warns her that he must report Robert's actions now that he's changing his actions.



Robert confesses to Stella- Robert is called home to urgently discuss an offer made on the house. The origin of this offer is unknown but it throws his mother and Ernestine into doubt about their future. The phone rings and goes unanswered. Robert is visibly shaken by the call. Rattled by the phone call and by his awareness of being under surveillance, he goes to Stella's flat fearing that he will never see her again. He needs to see her one more time, tell her the truth about his actions, and say goodbye. When he meets her, Robert tells Stella that what Harrison has said is true and confesses the whole of his actions and explains his version of loyalty and patriotism:

Country? There are no countries. Nothing but names...I'm against the racket...The racket of freedom, the freedom to be what? muddled, mediocre, damned...This war is about so much bloody quibbling about a thing that's pre-decided! Either side's winning would stop the war, but only their side's winning would stop the quibbling!

Stella is angry and confused, but still loves Robert. The illusion of their lives together is shattered, and they both know it will be the last time they see each other.



Robert dies- Harrison is lurking outside along with another agent. Robert can sense their presence and escapes through Stella's skylight and onto the roof. He tries to run across the roof, but his injury gets the best of him, and he falls to his death.



Harrison's last visit - As unceremoniously as Robert died, Harrison disappeared. He has now reappeared at Stella's new flat. Stella has actually missed him, and his absence immediately following Robert's death left her alone. This meeting will be their last. Bombs fall outside and both lament what could have been, but the moment, and Robert, are gone now. It is their final goodbye.



THEMES

Loyalty - At the centre of this film is the question of loyalty, not only to a nation during wartime, but loyalty in love and relationships. Stella's predicament forces her to choose between allegiance to her country and her lover. The choice is not as clear as it appears on the surface, however. Stella spars with Harrison to find a way she can both save Robert from being entangled with British Intelligence and preserve England by stopping Robert from passing information to Germany. She believes that by tipping Robert off, she will render him useless to the intelligence officers who are hoping for him to lead them to others in the treasonous conspiracy, and, at the same time, keep Robert from sharing information because he will know that he is being watched. For Stella, loyalty is not a black and white choice; it's not Robert or England, but Robert and England.

Appearance vs. reality - The film is mired in secrets and partial truths. The viewers, like Stella, are never on solid ground and are never privy to the entire truth. Until Robert's confession and his death, it is not clear how true Harrison's accusations are. Harrison's accusations are overshadowed by his proposal to Stella that she sleep with him in order to save Robert from arrest. Because his motivations are mired in a cloud of blackmail, Harrison does not convey truthfulness in his assertions. His connection to Cousin Frankie and Ireland are never fully revealed and Stella only confirms their connection while visiting Frankie's estate in Ireland when the caretaker reports having seen Harrison there on multiple occasions. In a similar way, only Robert's death can confirm the veracity of Harrison's claims. In the final meeting between Stella and Harrison, she claims she has missed his clandestine visits and without him or Robert she feels entirely alone and intimates that, at one point, things could have been different. Now, it becomes unclear if Stella was blackmailed or if she grew closer to Harrison over the course of their intrigue.

Love - The notion of love and marriage is inverted in this film. The conventional link between love and marriage is inverted in the film, and love is weaponised by both men. Both Harrison and Robert claim to love Stella, but in their own self-interest. Harrison becomes obsessed with Stella as he is surveilling Robert. He takes clandestine photos of her instead of photos strictly of Robert's activities. His obsession consumes him until he proposes that if Stella has an affair with him rather than Robert, she can save his life and he will not report Robert's activities. Harrison is counting on the fact that Stella will do anything to save Robert. His offer is manipulative and serves, not his country, but only his obsession. In their final meeting, Harrison explains that his attraction to Stella grew over time and became unbearable. Stella never gives in to his demands and finds his offer repulsive.

Robert also makes a play for Stella's loyalty through love. The two are in a relationship but have never married. Robert proposes after she tells him of Harrison's allegations. The proposal is hasty, Robert asking why they shouldn't marry and saying that they are already in the kind of relationship that feels like a marriage. Stella doesn't accept his offer and questions Robert's intentions as she suspects his timing has a direct correlation to the news of Harrison's allegations.

Stella rejects both Robert's proposal and Harrison's offer and tries to find her own way to save Robert from Harrison while escaping an entanglement with Harrison. In their final meeting Stella decisively tells Harrison that even though he may not have physically caused Robert's death, he is responsible. Robert's actions put this entire intrigue into motion, but Stella refuses to let love be used against her for the benefit of others.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Stella Rodney Stella is the central character of the film. She is an independent woman carving out her own path in wartime London. She is savvy in her tactics of communication as she navigates Robert's possible treasonous activities and Harrison's surveillance.

Independent Stella lives her life as she sees fit and not according to anyone's expectations. She is a divorced woman, raising her son alone. She never remarried and turns down Robert's proposal. Marriage is not her goal. Her insistence to live her own life is evident in the final scene where she insists on staying in her flat amid bombing raids. When Harrison suggests she should be down in a bomb shelter during the raid, she shrugs him off. Afraid of nothing and not swayed by others, neither Harrison, nor Robert, Stella leads life on her own terms.

Savvy Harrison is a trained counterspy, yet Stella goes toe to toe with him conversationally and does not back down in the face of his indecent proposal, his blackmail, and his vagaries. She is daring and intelligent, figuring out her next steps in sinking Harrison and saving Robert, all while avoiding becoming Harrison's mistress. She keeps her plans from both Harrison and Robert as she contemplates her next move. When she finally confronts Robert on her way home from Ireland, Robert exclaims that she's known of Harrison's accusations for two months and has not revealed a thing. She has been sitting on that information without saying anything to Robert while spending that time deciding how to confront him without Harrison and his colleagues hurting or capturing

him.

Robert Kelway Robert is a British soldier who was previously injured during his service. He is now disillusioned by the very nature of war and begins to feed information to Germany in hopes for a quick end to the war. Stella is his oasis. Wrapped up in these treasonous activities, he becomes secretive, and his motivations are unclear.

Bitter Robert is disillusioned by the very idea of war. We can see him limp in the opening frames of the film and later learn that his disability is a remnant of his injury at Dunkirk. His treatment upon his return to England after his injury fuelled his belief that war was something enacted by nations but fought by citizens for reasons beyond their control. England showed no loyalty to him when he returned from battle. Therefore, he holds no loyalty to England and only wishes for an end to the war and to the suffering of soldiers.

Elusive Robert evades questions about his past and his motivations. This evasion is particularly evident when Stella goes with him to visit his family at their home. His childhood bedroom is filled with photographs that his family has hung on the walls. Stella asks about the photo of his father and Robert answers that his father was a sensitive man who "let himself be buckled into his marriage" like his sister's Labrador was buckled into his collar. He says, "My father's death was a great relief, to me that is, and probably to him." There is an enormity and a resentment in his words, but he never explains what they mean to Stella. Robert thinks deeply, yet keeps his full thoughts hidden away from his family, and from Stella.

Harrison No one knows Harrison well. As a spy for the British government, he keeps his information close to his chest. His true intentions are never clear. He uses Stella as a means to get to Robert and uncover the nature of his treason. He is entirely focused on his work. Stella and Robert are collateral damage in his mission to get to the heart of Robert's activities against the war effort.

Unknowable Harrison purposely does not reveal any information about himself. He is always on duty. We can see his refusal to disclose personal details in his interaction with Louie at the park. She tries to get to know him, but Harrison shuts down all of her efforts. As they are leaving the park he refuses to give Louie his name or address. "Wait a minute, I don't know your name," says Louie. "No you don't," replies Harrison as he walks away. He does the same with Stella when she asks where he lives. He answers vaguely and she asks him more specifically where he keeps his razor. He replies, "I've got more than one razor," and still does not reveal his address.

Focused His elusive behaviour is a symptom of his singular focus on Stella and Robert. Absorbed in his surveillance, Harrison becomes enamoured with Stella. At her flat, he tells Stella how he first noticed her in a photo he took of her in Regent's Park while she was unaware of his watching her every move. His obsession and infatuation with her deepened when he met her in person at the funeral and eventually he could no longer distinguish business from pleasure. His unhealthy attraction for Stella becomes intertwined with his investigation into Robert. He can no longer separate the two.