

THE UNCANNY HOUSE IN ELIZABETH BOWEN'S FICTION

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Abstract: It has been pointed out by critics, such as H. Lee, S. Wasson and others, that the house is a focal point in many Bowen's works. It plays a significant role and has a symbolic dominance in the novels and short-stories written by the author. "A living, organic part of the world", as Elizabeth Bowen calls it, in her fiction the house has the value very much like a character. In this paper we would like to discuss the image of the house from the novel *The Death of the Heart* within the notion of the uncanny. In our paper we will rely on the theoretical frameworks of psychoanalytic literary criticism, the works of S. Freud, E. Jentsch, and N. Royle. The domestic space of the novel is presented as alien and frightening, and the house is distinguished by its sinister darkness, emptiness and the cold. For its inhabitants, it can suddenly lose its familiarity and become unfriendly and uneasy to stay at. The house engenders loneliness, alienation and estrangement. But this uncanniness is subjective and originates in the characters' traumatic experience of the past, namely the loss of family (orphanhood or childlessness) and/or homelessness and exile.

Key-words: uncanny; domestic space; trauma.

The house is a focal point in many Bowen's fiction works. It plays a significant role and has a symbolic dominance in her novels and short-stories. In her essays Elizabeth Bowen calls it "a living, organic part of the world", "a thing of windows" (Bowen 2008: 130). So, on the one hand, it is a thing and on the other hand, it is living. These words of the writer are a very good example of what the house is like in her novels, inanimate and alive at the same time. This contradiction or maybe skilful combination of incompatible features refers us directly to the notion of the uncanny for which we are obliged to the well-known psycho-analyst S. Freud.

Domestic space depicted in Bowen's novels and short stories can be very well described within the uncanny. It is "unhomelike", familiar but foreign, domestic but unfriendly at the same time. The house is strange and frightening, uneasy to stay at, often arousing the sense of insecurity and anxiety, fear and sometimes even horror.

The similes and metaphors that E. Bowen uses to describe the house in the novel *The House in Paris* are as follows: a deep dark well, a prison, a living creature, a monster, a sinister doll house, it seems to be very narrow, with hardly any windows, although there were plenty of them seen outside. The darkness of the house, its exceeding silence, objects that "did not wait to be seen but came crowding in on her, each

with what amounted to its aggressive cry” (Bowen 1987: 24) - these and others are the descriptions of a nice little house in one of the most beautiful cities in the world - in Paris.

A peaceful Irish country house Montefort from the novel *A World of Love* is called monstrous and eerie, provoking its inhabitants to feel besieged, under threat. The ghostly house of the short story *The Demon Lover* with its supernatural elements makes the reader feel like in the gothic. In Bowen's war-time novel and other short stories we can see ruined houses, devastated and empty, with the creaking stairs and the ends of torn wallpaper fluttering in the draughts - a pretty apocalyptic picture.

What makes those houses so strange and frightful or makes them seem so? What is the source of this uncomfortable uncertainty enveloping the house in Bowen's fiction? In our work we will try to see why analysing one of E. Bowen's novels - *The Death of the Heart*.

2 Windsor Terrace, the London house of the novel, is often compared to a well, an underground, a grave, a web, an island, a labyrinth, in a word, to different kinds of a trap. The house looks dark and empty: “the hall was a well of dusk - not a light on yet, either upstairs or down” (Bowen 1987: 22), “the blackness of windows not yet lit or curtained made the house look hollow inside...” (Bowen 1987: 12).

J. Brooke insists on the great importance of landscape or the surrounding in E. Bowen's works and its close connection with the action in the story. In Brooke's opinion Bowen is the kind of writer who is primarily interested in the atmosphere and what we 'see' in the novel is more important than what we 'hear'. I cannot totally agree with this point of view, as to my mind it is very important what we hear or rather do not hear in her texts, that is silence, which fills and almost endeavors the house in Bowen's novel: "Portia lay in a sort of coffin of silence... Outside the room there sounded a vacuum of momentarily arrested London traffic" (Bowen 1987: 85) or "a house ... to which, through the big windows, darkness and silence had naturally stolen in and begun to inhabit" (Bowen 1987: 22).

And what is also important is what we feel, namely the cold (cold January days, the cold hall and Thomas's study, etc.). According to Freud the uncanny effect is often produced by silence, darkness and solitude. Let's leave the solitude apart for a while and focus on the environment.

Bowen's characters, says J. Brooke, are a part of the landscape, and her main preoccupation is to show "the relationships between the individual and his environment" (Brooke 1952, 8). Here I can partially agree, although I believe that the landscape is rather a part of characters, as the

house and objects are often anthropomorphized. Not only the house is presented as a living creature, but the objects seem to possess sentience: “Unnatural living runs in a family, and the furniture knows it, you be sure. Good furniture knows what’s what. It knows it’s made for a purpose and it respects itself ... Oh, furniture like we’ve got is too much for some that would rather not have the past. If I just had to look at it and have it looking at me, I’d go jumpy, I daresay. But when it’s your work it can’t do anything to you” (Bowen 1987: 81).

What creates this uneasy atmosphere and do all the characters share this feeling of uncanny? Major Brutt’s impression of the Windsor Terrace house is a warm and a bright one, where one can get a warm welcome. Mrs. Heccomb describes it as a happy house, extremely hospitable. St Quentin, a writer and a family friend, sees firelight making a cheerful play in the drawing-room. Then, the house must be subjectively perceived as uncanny by only some of the characters.

In her novels Bowen uses figurative narrative perspective (i. e. through characters), and deictic words (e. g. today, now, here), we often come across in the text, reflect characters’ perspective in free indirect discourse. As a signal of subjectivity it marks that the events are shown from certain characters’

point of view. Thus, within the novel one can identify the stream of thoughts of Portia, Thomas, his wife Anna, the maid Matchett in different fragments of the text.

As for the plot, like in most Bowen's novels it is rather intricate. After her parents have died, a 16 year old Portia arrives in London to live with her half-brother and his wife. With Portia's coming to Windsor Terrace, three of them, she, Thomas and Anna, feel weird with each other. Memories of the past begin to saturate the house and their thoughts. All of them are linked with the same family story.

As a result of his liaison with Irene and Portia to be born, Mr Quayne had to leave his first wife and son, and his house which he loved so much, and was 'sent' abroad. Portia and her parents were merely homeless, they "trailed up and down the cold parts of the Riviera, till he [Mr Quayne] caught a chill and died in a nursing home" (Bowen 1987: 14). Mrs Quayne died shortly after that. Portia's family had lived "with no place in the world and nobody to respect" (Bowen 1987: 78). "She had grown up exiled not only from her own country but from normal, cheerful family life" (Bowen 1987: 15).

According to E. Jentsch (1996), the uncanny effect is produced due to the fact of the breach of social taboo,

revealing something hidden from public eye inevitably makes up a dangerous threat and, especially if the concealed is sexual in nature, is related to the sin concept.

The idea of Portia as his father's daughter embarrassed Thomas, her half-brother, he was filled with shame - "on behalf of his father, himself and society" (Bowen 1987: 40). After father's leaving he became convinced that one should detest intimacies and should never be attached to anyone: "He dreaded ... to be loved with any great gush of the heart" (Bowen 1987: 39). In this state of fortification he locked himself in his study and immersed in solitude - "loneliness lay on his study like a cloud" (Bowen 1987: 92). Callers, when they did occur, were received with "galvanized" or even "agonized heartiness".

Anna, who is an orphan herself, cannot have children. She had two miscarriages and after that convinced herself and others that she did not want children. When Portia came to live with them, she occupied the room which was supposed to be a nursery and would now remind Anna of her childlessness. Portia and she lived with each other with an opposed heart.

The repetition of the word 'heart' in the text, like "the turned-in heart", "the empty heart", "slackening hearts", "heartless" and many others, and its strong position in the title of the novel - "the death of the heart" may imply the lack

of warm feelings, intimacies, simply love among people. The motif of a fire that does not give warmth, a painted hearth is also recurrent. “The rooms were set for strangers intimacy, or else for exhausted solitary retreat” (Bowen 1987: 42). The solitude and the painful memories evoked by Portia’s arrival influence characters’ perception of home and domestic space.

But the uncanny does not only contribute to the fragmentation of space and time, but according to N. Royle (2003), the fragmentation of the self, too. He describes the uncanny in terms of the “crisis of the proper”, when one’s sense of oneself (“personality”, “sexuality”, etc.) seems strangely questionable. N. Royle claims that the uncanny dissolves the assurances about the identity of a self. I think it may work the other way round, too. The crises of the self and confusion about one’s identity cause the emergence of the uncanny feeling.

Having found out about the circumstance of her coming to the world, Portia seeks to understand who she is, to know the purpose of her existence: “They would forgive me if I were something special. But I don’t know what I was meant to be” (Bowen 1987: 79). That is probably the reason why she starts writing her diary, in attempt to reconcile the past and the present.

The house is ghostly, it is full of memories of the past, painful reminiscences haunting the characters. The furniture

which 'remembers' the past is only personification of people's remembering. It is what Freud calls "suffering from reminiscences", when "symptoms are residues and mnemonic symbols of particular (traumatic) experiences" (Freud 2003: 88). Not only do they remember painful experience of the remote past, but they still cling to them emotionally; they cannot get free of the past. Wishing to suppress the emotions they remain with a permanent burden upon their life which manifests itself as the feeling of uncanny.

Memories of the past caused Portia's dream. Its manifest content is as follows: Portia sees a continent in the late sunset. Eddie and she are sitting on the step of a hut, back to the door. She does not know what is there in the hut but she feels its darkness. Unearthly level light is streaming in their faces penetrating their dark hearts. The continent rings with silence. They are sitting with their hands hanging down peacefully. Portia feels calmness and similarity.

If the true meaning has its starting point in experiences of the previous day, we should go back to its events. Portia was agitated by two things - a letter she had received from Eddie (a young man Portia starts being attracted to) and a talk she had with the maid Matchett about her parents and her birth. Now, in order to reveal the latent dream-thoughts, we should entirely disregard the apparent connections

between the elements in the manifest dream and collect the ideas, associations appearing in connection with each separate element of the dream according to the psychoanalytic rule of procedure. I singled out the following elements: the continent - the sunset - the unearthly eternal light - the darkness (dark hearts and the dark hut) - silence - peacefully hanging hands - calmness and similarity.

The continent is associated with Portia's life in France, exile, travelling, hotels and finally with her parents. The hands hanging down peacefully remind me of nothing but a dead man's hands position and are associated with death. So is the sunset (as the end of the day, the death of the sun); and so are silence and calmness. As for the light and the dark, according to Freud, "Ideas which are contraries are by preference expressed in dreams by one and the same element" (Freud 2003: 42). So I am inclined to suppose that both words mean the dark, which again refers us to "death" or possibly mean "absence, lack of something". If we go back to "dark hut" and "dark hearts" (allusion to the title - the death of the heart) we can get "lack of home" and "lack of love". The similarity she feels towards Eddie is that they are both lonely. As Eddie confessed to her once saying: "I [Eddie] do feel homeless and sad" (Bowen 1987: 152), and wrote her in his letter: "You and I are two rather alone people" (Bowen 1987: 54). The

graphic closeness of the words 'heart' and 'hearth', which is as well repeated in the text, intensifies the connection between heart and home, lack of home and lack of feelings. As J. Brook points out, *The Death of the Heart* is a novel about "insensibility, the emotional atrophy" (Brooke 1952: 22-23)

In conclusion, the domestic space of the novel is presented as foreign, unnatural and frightening, and the house is distinguished by its sinister darkness, silence, emptiness and the cold. It is unfriendly and uneasy to stay at. The house engenders loneliness, alienation and estrangement. But this uncanniness is subjective and originates in the characters' traumatic experience of the past, namely the loss of family (orphanhood or childlessness) and/or homelessness and exile. These traumatic reminiscences become the cause of the domestic space uncanniness in Bowen: "To remember can be at times no more than a cold duty, for we remember only in the limited way that is bearable. We observe small rites, but we defend ourselves from the rooms, the scenes, the objects that make for hallucination, that make the senses start up and fasten upon a ghost. We desert those who desert us; we cannot afford to suffer; we must live how we can" (Bowen 1987: 148).

Notes

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