

## Home Is Where the Matchett Is: How Elizabeth Bowen's Themes are Construed Through Settings

Would Elizabeth Bowen contend along with the rest of society that home is where the heart is? Is the lack of home, as a place or concept, *The Death of the Heart*? Bowen makes use of settings in this well-known novel, and her characters' actions and interactions within them to characterize their dynamic struggles with society, love, and purpose. Her protagonist, sixteen-year-old Portia, now an orphan, is taken in by her half-brother and his wife. Should not an orphan given a home be satisfied—happy, even? Portia's obscure position leads one to wonder what *home* really means, and if a proper home is the key to happiness, or a lively heart. Several characters in this novel struggle with their lack of security, privacy, comfort, and love—all of which are universal privileges associated with homes. *The Death of the Heart* explores whether that is true for everyone—and if it is not, where does the heart find comfort, purpose, or life?

A majority of the novel takes place within Windsor Terrace where Anna and Thomas Quayne reside. Both the narrative descriptions of this home and the interactions of characters within it are crucial aspects that propel the novel's themes and establish the characters. However, Bowen places the very start of the novel outdoors in the frigid heart of winter where Anna meets her friend St. Quentin Martin to vent about her anxieties regarding the new guest in her home. In opening the novel with Anna confiding in St. Quentin outside in the freezing cold, there is immediate emphasis on the lack of privacy and comfort Anna must feel inside her own home. Furthermore, the pair are speaking about Anna having read Portia's diary. When St. Quentin mentions wanting to read it, Anna suggests that "[i]t might make you not come to our house again," and regarding the same subject, Anna herself says, "...you see now, why I'd rather not be at home?" (10). Readers are immediately plunged into the irony of the situation: Anna

feels she is being watched in her own home, though she is the one invading Portia's own privacy—her personal diary. Anna also furtively discusses the scandalous nature of Portia's beginnings—the affair that Thomas' father had with a foreign woman. Again, that Bowen constructed this clandestine conversation between the two *outdoors* suggests both the detachment Anna feels from the situation, and that this scandalous aspect of Portia and Thomas' life does not belong inside of her home. Thus begins the peculiar situation that extends throughout the novel; both Portia and Anna feel discomfort at Windsor Terrace due to each others' presence—a conflict with home at the center.

While Anna and St. Quentin continue their secluded discussion, a second chapter begins with Portia arriving at the end of her day to “a house without any life above-stairs, a house to which nobody had returned yet, which, through the big windows, darkness and silence had naturally stolen in on and begun to inhabit” (23). The initial description Bowen gives of this home speaks volumes toward its inhabitants. Though literally, Anna and Thomas had not yet returned home, Bowen could be subtly commenting on the lack of life “upstairs,” or within the minds of Thomas and Anna; they exist simply, passively, without active minds or hearts. Though they are the only characters who possess what others would deem a proper home, Bowen makes it apparent that Thomas and Anna are far from perfect or emotionally stable. Further, the “darkness and silence” invading the home may be Bowen's way of referring to Portia's invasive presence and the trouble and aloofness she brings out between the married couple through the “big windows,” or gaps and fragilities in their relationship.

When a couple is married, it is common to say that the pair is *building a home*. This phrase generally refers to the shared home life that the two are beginning to embark upon. We learn from the novel that though the couple originally planned for children, Anna has had two

miscarriages, and thus, no children (46). From a societal perspective, this might be a flaw in the building of their home or a hole in the fabric of their marriage. When Portia comes to live with them, she is young enough to be their child, and so some of the strain in the relationship between her and Anna could arise from Anna's subconscious expectations placed upon Portia. This could be inferred when Bowen describes the room Anna is setting up for Portia in anticipation of her arrival: "...a room with a high barred window, that could have been the nursery" (47). Several times throughout the novel, Anna reflects on how she can't quite put her finger on why she is bothered by Portia (323). In this scene before Portia's arrival, Bowen writes: "From the bed—Anna tried for a moment with her head on the pillow—you saw, as though in the country, nothing but the tops of trees. Anna had, at this moment before they met, the closest feeling for Portia she ever had" (47). In this moment before Portia's arrival, the idea of harboring a child in her home clearly evoked Anna's maternal instincts—those regarding protection and affection. It isn't until Anna meets and lives with Portia that she realizes—consciously or not—that Portia doesn't fit the mold of their hypothetical child. The care that Anna shows in making up Portia's room and the act of laying on the bed to see from Portia's prospective perspective prove that though she was never keen on Portia coming, there was an inkling of hopeful expectation.

In continuance of the initial scene portrayed of Windsor Terrace, Bowen describes Portia as standing "askance" underneath the "complex shadow" of "Anna's cut-glass lamp" (24). Bowen is using minute aspects of this home to develop both Anna and Portia's characters; this particular one emphasizes the intimidating nature both of the Quayne's home and Anna herself. As the novel progresses, we begin to see that Portia *does* hold herself with a sort of suspicious, mistrusting air under the presence of Anna's discernable unease and dislike for her. Bowen writes, in the first direct interaction between the two, that to Anna "the drawingroom...appeared

to be empty—then by the light of one distant lamp and the fire [she] perceived Portia...almost blotted out against a dark lacquer screen..." (28). Making use of her characters' actions in this setting, Bowen implies the dimmed presence Portia has in Anna's life. This description might also imply that Anna's initial failure to detect Portia in the room is a result of her deliberate efforts to "blot out" Portia's existence from her mind altogether. Though Anna superficially provides things for Portia and attempts to give her a normal family life, the underlying aversion that Anna has for her is apparent, which makes Anna "complex," indeed.

Even more complex are the unfurling details of Thomas and Anna's relationship. Bowen's placement of the two within their home works as a literary device that emphasizes their estrangement from one another: Thomas primarily resides in his downstairs study, while Anna is either out of the house or upstairs in the drawingroom. The latter is the case in the scene of their first interaction in the novel, and so the couple's first words to one another are spoken through a telephone within their home (31). When Anna hangs up with Thomas, St. Quentin asks, "Does he want anything special?" to which Anna replies, "Just to say he is in" (31). Bowen gives an immediate tip to readers regarding the nature of Thomas and Anna's relationship here; there is emphasis on their lack of directness with one another, the lack of emotional demands that they make on one another, and the clear emotional distance between them. Thus, readers begin to learn that, though they are in possession of a physical home, Thomas and Anna are not characters who evade *the death of the heart*.

Anna's decision for the two to take a trip abroad is an obvious hint—again making use of setting—at her desperation to avoid Portia—she is only to live with them for one year, and yet, Anna could not handle even half of that. However, the pair returns to Windsor Terrace unhappier than Bowen has portrayed them before; Anna and Thomas have a strained

conversation and brief argument. Anna pleads with him: “We’re *home*, Thomas: have some ideas about home,” which, along with the harsh words they say to one another, prove that despite their status as wealthy, married homeowners, they are unhappy and restlessly so—there is recognition that *home* does not mean what they want it to (314). Afterwards, Anna reflects that “[Portia] has put me into a relation with Thomas that is no more than our taunting, feverish jokes” (323). Anna blames Portia for their problems, but Bowen suggests that there is a recurring theme of broken relationships and homes. Mr. Quayne, Thomas’ father, after all, broke their home when he had an affair with Irene. Anna muses, “But, after all, death runs in that family,” a statement too obvious to not mean more—death runs in every family, doesn’t it? Here, perhaps, Bowen is directly addressing her title. The death of hearts is what “runs in [the Quayne] family,” and it has affected all three generations: Mr. and Mrs. Quayne, Thomas and Anna, and now, Portia. Anna, with her hidden old love letters and trauma from Pidgeon, is not very far off from Portia and *her* hidden love letters and tumultuous relationship—not only is one broken home leading to another, but perhaps these similarities are what Anna dislikes about Portia’s presence, though she can’t explicitly name them.

Despite Anna’s past trauma from a bad relationship, her passive disinterest in Portia’s life and wellbeing allows the perilous relationship that Portia and Eddie take on. Though it is apparent that Eddie is using Portia to get Anna’s attention, Portia truly falls for Eddie—in terms of home, he is an outsider like she is. Bowen’s describes Eddie in these terms by writing that “[h]e had been the brilliant child of an obscure home...” (76). Right off the bat, knowing that Portia grew up in hotels and has two dead parents, readers are informed that Eddie and Portia have, at the very least, similar origins in respect to their lack of homely comfort to fall back upon, and their obscure positions in life. Next, Bowen writes that the couple with whom Eddie

was living “...went to live abroad...seeing no other way to get rid of [him]” (78). Bowen uses Eddie’s living arrangements to portray his effect on people as overbearing and vexatious—not unlike Portia’s effect on people. That his hosts felt “no other way to get rid” of Eddie besides uprooting and moving themselves emphasizes Eddie’s ignorance and lack of consideration for the feelings of others. This also begins to suggest his psychological issues—mainly his refusal to see himself clearly or the distortion of the way he believes to be perceived by others.

Portia’s visit to the Heccomb’s home at Waikiki is where we reach the climax of the chaotic roller-coaster ride that is Eddie and Portia’s relationship. As Walter Sullivan writes in his review entitled “A Sense of Place: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of the Heart,” “The decaying house at the beach, the paint cracked, the shutters flapping, is a proper setting for Eddie to continue his betrayal of Portia, and the house in turn becomes symbolic of the action it enfolds” (144). Portia’s time spent at Seale-on-Sea is the first time she truly experiences interacting with people her own age, and it is these interactions that take her from a character who is lost, innocent, and exiled to one that feels cheated, jealous, and desperate for the connections that others have. The Heccombs are a far more boisterous, albeit close-knit family than the Quaynes, and the sense of purpose that Daphne and Dickie feel in their lives and in their home is bound to perplex Portia into a state of agitated jealousy. Their busy, fun agendas with parties and friends are what leads Portia to invite Eddie. In a seemingly desperate state of spontaneity, Portia “suddenly said to Daphne: ‘A friend of mine—could he ever come and stay here?’” (226). Eddie’s stay at Waikiki proves to be destructive, and the height of action occurs when Eddie and Portia walk outdoors to “the woods” which “...when she had been looking forward to Eddie, had played no part in the landscape she saw in her heart” (274). In these “*private*” woods, Portia desperately throws herself upon Eddie, kissing him in the midst of

hysterics (274-278). This scene is where we see Portia break down emotionally—she cannot seem to obtain the sense of home (love, comfort, privacy) that others do. Bowen’s inclusion of the “*Private*” sign upon entering these woods is a hint at this; even an explicit label does not guarantee anything (274). That Bowen writes this scene between the two outdoors in the middle of an uninhabited forest is deliberate: they are still outsiders.

The entirety of Eddie’s stay at Waikiki reveals the deceptive, uncaring nature of his character, especially when he obtains a key to an empty home nearby. Here, Portia becomes distraught when she confronts Eddie about his holding hands with Daphne, and Eddie merely makes her out to be a fool. The conversation goes nowhere, which could have been surmised from Bowen’s foreshadowing line preceding the scene: “There is nothing like exploring an empty house” (255). The empty house, in this case, is actually Eddie’s empty heart.

Bowen’s later description of Eddie’s flat further confirms his character. Regarding the atmosphere of his living-space, Bowen uses the words “unaired,” “chilly,” and “unadult,” which can all be applied to Eddie himself—he has issues that he will never address, and at his core, he is a fairly cold person (364). Further, the room possess a “lack of tactile feeling bred by large stark objects...” which also can speak to Eddie’s character: his overbearing nature and often shockingly rude actions (such as his blunt comments to fragile Portia, his flirtation with Daphne, his drunkenness at Waikiki) contribute to his uncaring, selfish nature. The scene where we see Eddie’s flat is towards the end of the novel when his tumultuous relationship with Portia begins to fizz out. In the flat, Bowen writes, “Portia kept going round and round the room, looking hard at everything...[s]he had been here before...but she gave the impression of being someone who, having lost his way...has to go back and start from the beginning again” (364). After a brief, painful discussion, Eddie shuts Portia down and tells her

that he is Anna's lover. Portia's actions in this room—the unease, and her feeling out of place though it should be a familiar place—are congruent with the new, devastating information she learns about a man she thought she knew. “On the smoky buff walls and unpolished woodwork neurosis, of course, could not write a trace. To be received by Eddie in such frowsty surroundings could be taken as either confiding or insolent” (365). These lines are perhaps a reflection of Portia's perception of Eddie in sum. She, despite her desperate efforts, cannot detect Eddie's true character—he is at first kind, a potential lover, and later, rude and even cruel. Either way, it is by design that from Eddie alone (or his room), it is impossible to discern his true intentions, his true self.

Portia, more lost than ever, resolves to go to Major Brutt. Major Brutt is characterized as an outsider early on in the novel, where we learn of his difficulty in securing both a home and job—likely due to his lack of social expertise. Bowen almost solely characterizes Major Brutt with this information, and Sullivan writes, “...the hotel where Major Brutt lives reflects not only his honest poverty, but the fact that with all his simple probity, he, like the building, has fallen behind the times” (144). Of the hotel where he lives, Bowen writes: “Most privacy, though least air, is to be had in the attics, which were too small to be divided up. One of these attics Major Brutt occupied” (375). It is worth noting that Bowen includes this statement, because, at this point in the novel, Portia is suffering from not only a lack of love, but a lack of privacy—she has learned that her diary was exposed. Major Brutt is another character on the outskirts of society that takes interest in Portia—but unlike Eddie, Major Brutt is more genuine in character, and doesn't have an agenda behind his kindness toward her. Unfortunately, this puts him in an uncomfortable situation. Portia, much to his discomfort, traps herself under Major Brutt's



blankets, where she perhaps might've stubbornly stayed a long time, had Thomas and Anna not sent Matchett to retrieve her.

Matchett, Bowen writes, "had come on to 2 Windsor Terrace with the furniture that had always been her charge" (25). As the housemaid, Matchett may initially come off as a minor character. However, in tandem with Bowen's emphasis on home throughout the novel, it can be concluded that, as the only character who has been present through generations (she served Thomas' father Mr. Quayne and was present during his affair and during Mrs. Quayne's death), Matchett is a central character to the story. Bowen gives her almost an omniscient air that comes out when she says things like: "Unnatural living runs in a family, and the furniture knows it, you be sure. Good furniture knows what's what...Oh, furniture like we've got is too much for some that would rather not have the past" (101). Matchett is the only character who seems to be able to explicitly acknowledge the discomfort of the others in the house, and as a literary device, Matchett is used to emphasize that the past is inescapable and resistant even to the comfort of homes.

Though at times unfeeling and standoffish, Matchett proves to bring Portia comfort and, by Bowen's design, can be argued to epitomize home itself. The scene in which Matchett visits Portia to say goodnight paves way for this discernment. Matchett entertains Portia with memories of her father and her birth while lying in bed alongside her—a gesture that is perhaps the most intimate one Portia receives throughout the events of the novel. However, Bowen deliberately refrains from making this scene too cozy or mushy—Matchett is at times "soft" (99), but at others "cold, dispassionate" (103), and "laden" (105). Though Matchett is the only adult figure at Windsor Terrace who seems to care about Portia's feelings, Bowen writes that even Portia perceives Matchett as "inexorable" (96). Simultaneously attempting to comfort Portia in

a home where she feels unwelcomed and maintaining her businesslike, no-nonsense manner, Matchett takes on the qualities of home as Bowen wishes to present them to readers: with aspects of permanence, comfort, and privacy—which, at times, morphs more discontentedly into secrecy.

In *The Death of the Heart*, we learn how characters came to be who they are from their living experiences, like Portia's growing up living in hotels, and Eddie and Major Brutt's rootlessness. Through Bowen's portrayal of Anna and Thomas' interactions at Windsor Terrace, we learn what Bowen's message is. Though homes, superficially, are thought to provide necessary comfort and privacy, Bowen emphasizes that if there is conflict within the heart, even these privileges of home will not revive it. In Matchett's tough-love attitude, this is embodied, and in Thomas and Anna's deteriorating, arguably dead hearts, this is proven. Portia's shattered heart, however, still has the potential to find its home, as Bowen suggests by bringing Matchett towards her in the end. Perhaps Elizabeth Bowen would say that home is where the heart is *alive*.

## Work Cited

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