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# Christmas at Bowen's Court: Elizabeth Bowen's Christmas Ghost Stories ~ Jessica Gildersleeve

Elizabeth Bowen wrote a surprisingly large number of stories and essays about Christmas, a period which seems to have preoccupied her. In part this was for financial reasons: Christmas stories appear to have sold well to the American magazine market (Hepburn: 4), and Bowen wrote many of these pieces in the 1950s and 60s, after the death of her husband created a greater need for her to write commercially. But, perhaps rather strangely, the dominant theme of Bowen's Christmas writing is spectrality, in a range of forms. That is, while the holiday appears to have been of great meaning to her partly for its religious significance, she also recognises its strange ghostliness. Of course, we recall, 'I believe in God *and* ghosts!' as she once said (quoted in MacCarthy: 39). This article considers the range of Bowen's Christmas writing, both fiction and non-fiction, and especially her Christmas ghost stories. It considers the nature of gift-giving, of celebration, and family connection, all integral to the Christmas story, but also the way in which Christmas is a time of repetition and remembrance, thinking about how they work alongside one another in Bowen's Christmas canon. What I want to show, then, is that Bowen's Christmas writings present us with the two sides of Christmas: while the Christmas essays focus on the season as a time to restore peace and order, the Christmas stories, many of them ghost stories, draw out the season's potential for chaos and disruption.

**Bowen's Christmas Essays**

I have titled this article, 'Christmas at Bowen's Court,' for it was that return home to Bowen's Court each Christmas which informs her essays about the season. In *Bowen's Court* (1942), her family memoir, Bowen describes her seasonal return, noting the pleasure of a series of 'mild Christmases,' with no storms, and of 'the white mid-winter twilight … still reflected in the many windows' (449). The central symbol of Christmas here, and in her other essays, is the Christmas candle, usually given to her as a gift by a neighbour.

> Very tall and thick, of green, pink or yellow wax, the candle was planned to burn until Twelfth Night. Wreathed at its base with holly, on to whose berries the wax dropped, it stood on a folded card-table at the north end of the library …. In the cottages of Farahy and Kildorrery the fellows of that candle were
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> alight. Here, the room was so high that nay light faded before it reached the ceiling …. When the library shutters had been shut for the night and the dark heavy curtains drawn over them, mist, starlight or a cloud-thickened darkness lay forgotten outside the chilling panes. In the shadow cast up by the mantelpiece stood vases of holly, and Christmas cards. Footsteps of people taking the shortcut through the demesne were heard, now and then, under the windows (450).

In the essay 'Christmas at Bowen's Court,' the symbol is used again. Here, the Christmas candle 'burns in a book-darkened corner of the library, consecrating into a nameless altar the card table upon which it stands. Its fellows are in every home at my gate' (36); '[i]ts flame swerves, as though caught by a breath. This ever-burning, ever-sinking candle becomes a timepiece: the dark season is not after all what it seems to be, an eternity' (37). The candlelight thus becomes a means of creating community, cutting through the winter darkness. For any lost or lonely traveller, a candle lights the way: it 'show[s] man to man … signalling through the dark,' she writes ('Light in the Dark': 38).

Perhaps for this reason, Bowen recalls that her ideal Christmas card depicts

> … a cottage gable in deep, dusky silhouette against an expiring gleam of sunset, one window lit; smoke goes up from the chimney. To this, a woodman returning, footprint by footprint, across the foreground snow; all around stretch white wastes, the bare trees are dark. How it glows and glows through that one small window—core of the world, magnet to man, the home! ('Light in the Dark': 39)

This, she says, 'remains for me forever the symbol-scene—no better picture, before or since, has so fixed for me that light in the falling dark; or by contrast, the elemental and daunting loneliness of the Elsewhere' (39). It is a tantalisingly spooky phrase—the Elsewhere, capitalised: ostensibly anywhere other than home, but thereby suggesting the candle-lit window as the only defence against the darkness and the unknown it hides.

Although the candle is a timepiece, such that its melting signifies the passing of a seemingly never-ending winter—'No other season, here, might ever have been' ('Christmas at Bowen's Court': 32)—its repeated, traditional use, brought out every year, suggests the way in which the season *is* never over. In one sense, this refers to what Bowen sees as the enduring influence of Christianity—as she writes in 'Light in the Dark,' 'the truth of the Story appears most in that it has no end' (40). But the Christmas candle also speaks to Bowen's abiding interest in the indefinite nature of time, and the way in which past and present collapse into one another. Indeed, as Adam Kuper has observed, an English Christmas is characterised by time 'spent at home, with the family: and it is regarded as a celebration of the family and its continuity' (157). 'Adults also revive memories of childhood Christmases,' he says, 'insisting on small rituals which recall them. Each Christmas repeats the previous one as much as possible. The same things are done in the same order. The same people arrive at the same moment and sit in the same places' (169-70). Each Christmas could be any other, marked as it is by ritual, tradition, and repetition.

Interestingly, the candle also appears as a symbol in a letter Bowen wrote to her lover Charles Ritchie, on All Souls' Day (2 November), 1946:

> I have been very conscious of religion these last months here in this country … On Saints' Days, especially All Saints' Day yesterday, which they call 'the day of the dead,' one feels a sort of influence in the air like the flame of a candle burning. (quoted in MacCarthy: 38)

The use here suggests the candle as a symbol of the endurance of the spirits of the dead. As Kuper has observed, '[t]he ritual time that constitutes the Christmas period has a special quality. It tends to freeze history, to associate this Christmas with Christmas past … Christmas is a period for remembering the dead, but including them; and ghosts walk on Christmas too' (169). Thus we see an endurance of the Christian birth story, to be sure, but also of death and loss—the determination to remember.

Let us return to the significance of Bowen's Christmas candle as a gift. While gift exchange does appear in Bowen's Christmas stories, its commercial aspect is generally not of interest to her. She speeds past this, just as she speeds through the streets of Limerick on her way to Christmas at Bowen's Court, past 'the incoherent splendour of shop displays. Few are Limerick shops which do not stock everything: at this season, all things burst into view, with an overlay of attractive "novelties"' ('Christmas at Bowen's Court': 34). The Christmas shopping scene in *Eva Trout* (1968) operates in a similar way, only redeemed by the Christmas carol, 'Silent Night,' which announces the coming of the child Jeremy. The gifts of most value in the short story 'Comfort and Joy,' for instance, are words of comfort, and handmade gifts of warmth which show genuine care and welcome. As Alan D. Schrift points out in relation to gift-giving, 'commodity exchange … exhibits the values [associated with] an ethic of rights based on abstract principles of reciprocity, while gift exchange exhibits the forming of and focus on relationships [associated] with an ethic of care based on interpersonal needs and responsibilities' (2-3). Thus, the candle operates as a means of forming community not only via the echoes of light, but as a gift which signifies those shared needs of warmth and connection.

A less successful gift is one given to Edward as a child in *Friends and Relations* (1931):

> Considine had sent him [Edward] a small stuffed bear that stood by the tree, upright, with brown paper over its head. It was a stuffed real bear, not jointed, not a teddy-bear, Edward, who had wished for a teddy-bear, pulled at its limbs in silence. 'It's a real bear, Edward.' 'I know it was once.' It was a dead bear now and appalled him. (58)

While it may seem that Considine has fulfilled his duty as an uncle and what Elfrida sees as his desire to be a part of their family by presenting the child with the toy he had wished for, his failure to recognise that what Edward really wanted was something to cuddle and care for, rather than an expensive ornament, signifies one of the problems operating in the Tilney family. The bear only fulfils the hollow (dead, stuffed, performative) requirements of a commodity exchange, rather than the ethics of care which underpins the gift. Gifts are possessions, argues James Carrier, but they also 'denote the relationship of identity between possessor and object. Thus,

giving a possession is not merely giving a material object, it is as well the giving of something identified with the giver' (56). Interestingly, a too-big bear is also the gift Eva chooses to give her as-yet-unmet child, Jeremy (it will smother him, Eva's old school friend and her acquaintances accuse Eva [*Eva Trout*: 155]), but accidentally leaves behind. In both cases, it is the ghost of a gift, we might say.

The candle, the bear, and the notion of the gift are important for our recognition of Bowen's conceptualisation of Christmas. Over and over in her essays on the season she emphasises connection to family, friends and neighbours—and of welcoming in those who might be alone, particularly during wartime. As she writes in 'The Christmas Toast is "Home!"': 'The thought of home at Christmas, a light that cannot be blacked out, sends its reflection to every part of the world. The darkness of war only makes this light stronger by contrast: it is a steady and consistent beam' (129). A home and friendship is the comfort, the gift, that one can provide to the lost or lonely, she repeats in 'Home for Christmas.' Home, comfort, tradition, and connection: these are the themes of Bowen's rather sentimental essays on Christmas, that 'carol philosophy' which finds its genesis in Charles Dickens (Miller: 3), and which she urges her readers to uphold.

**Bowen's Christmas Ghost Stories**

Interestingly, John Coates suggests that 'Bowen's ghost stories offer some of the most concentrated examples of her moral vision,' and that this moral vision is primarily concerned 'with social, spiritual and emotional disintegration' (293). This interest in restoring disintegration might help to explain why so much of her wartime writing consists of ghost stories, when ghosts are used to describe the strange threshold of life and death under which Bowen and her fellow Londoners lived during the Blitz. It also explains why Christmas recurs as a theme in her ghost stories, since, as we have just seen, Bowen sees Christmas as the time and opportunity to reintegrate, connect, restore. This is also interesting in respect of the fact that Christmas is traditionally a period of Carnival, an extraordinary day, a day of celebration and chaos, since, as Peter Burke points out, 'the birth of the Son of God in a manger was a spectacular example of the world turned upside down' (qtd in Harris: 9). As I have suggested, then, Bowen's Christmas writings present us with the two sides of Christmas: the essays focus on the season as a time to restore peace and order, while the stories, many of them ghost stories, draw out the season's potential for chaos and disruption.

Indeed, this is also the argument Derek Johnston has made about Christmas ghost stories for television, suggesting that 'these stories operate as opportunities to reaffirm social values and behaviours and to provide warning tales of what happens when these boundaries are transgressed, and that the recurring seasonal nature of these stories provides them with an added emphasis and power' (np). This can be seen in the collision of the pagan and the Christian in the celebration of these festivals, so that, for instance, 'the appearance of ghosts on Christmas Eve could be explained in Christian terms as the disturbance of souls in Purgatory, before the advent of the Saviour at midnight brought them peace' (Briggs qtd in Johnston: np). Thus the ghost story, typically with a conclusion in which order and peace are restored, became popular. Indeed, Jerome K. Jerome famously introduced his 1891 anthology of Christmas ghost stories by asserting that 'whenever five or six English-speaking people meet round a fire on Christmas Eve, they start telling each other

ghost stories. Nothing satisfies us on Christmas Eve but to hear each other tell authentic anecdotes about spectres' (qtd in Johnston: np).

Bowen wrote several Christmas stories, many of them ghost stories. I'm going to focus today on two of these, both published in *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* in 1945: 'Green Holly' and 'The Cheery Soul.' The Christmas stories that were not collected in Bowen's own publications, but rather included in magazines, and now available in Allan Hepburn's *The Bazaar and Other Stories*, are often about travel to an unfamiliar home or family, occasionally a heartwarming story of family and togetherness, often about the unsettling nature of wartime. One, 'Christmas Games,' even touches on the possibility of witchcraft, an unusual topic for Bowen, despite her interest in the supernatural. Rachel Mayrer has asserted that in the wartime supernatural stories 'Bowen skews the Gothic conventions she uses in order to reflect a new Gothic for a new age—one that has seen the effects of two world wars and not only dead soldiers but dead-in-life, walking dead, survivors. Her readers would no longer scare as easily at spectral apparitions after seeing the real-life horrors of humanity' (33-34). To some extent this is true of the ghost stories which take Christmas as their theme, but I would suggest that these stories are not so much interested in scaring us, as in providing an outlet for an overflow of emotion.

Both 'Green Holly' and 'The Cheery Soul' are set during the Second World War, and the influence of this strange time pervades each story. In her Postscript to *The Demon Lover* collection, Bowen famously described these wartime stories as 'resistance-fantasies,' a term I have analysed elsewhere as a means of acknowledging the way fantasy or hallucination becomes a kind of psychical retreat from the terror and stress of war (Gildersleeve: 88). 'You may say that these resistance-fantasies are in themselves frightening,' Bowen writes. 'I can only say that one counteracts fear by fear, stress by stress' ('Postscript': 220). She talks about some of the other stories in the collection before adding:

> The past, in all these cases, discharges its load of feeling into the anaesthetized and bewildered present. It is the 'I' that is sought—and retrieved at the cost of no little pain. And the ghosts—definite in 'Green Holly', questionable (for are they subjective purely?) in 'Pink May', 'The Cheery Soul' and 'The Demon Lover'—what part do they play? They are the certainties. The bodiless foolish wanton, the puritan other presence, the tipsy cook with her religion of English fare, the ruthless young soldier lover unheard of since 1916: hostile or not, they rally, they fill the vacuum for the uncertain 'I.' (220)

We have already seen that Christmas, for Bowen and for others, is ideally a time of certainty: of repetition and ritual. In this time of uncertainty, of wartime, the ghosts 'counteract' fear and stress with their own certainty, offering a definite site of fear to relocate or discharge the anxious dread which pervades the time of war.

In 'Green Holly,' a small group of wartime workers, engaged on a secret project, are trapped together in a country house as a 'skeleton staff' for the holiday. They have been away for so long, and in an unknown location for an unknown period for so long, that they seem to have been forgotten. '[T]hey were accounted for,' Bowen writes:

> if there were still anybody who still cared to ask; but on the whole they had dropped out of human memory. Their reappearances in their former circles were infrequent, ghostly and unsuccessful: their friends could hardly disguise their pity, and for their own part they had not a word to say. They had come to prefer to spend leaves with their families, who at least showed a flattering pleasure in their importance. ('Green Holly': 183)

Thus, this small group are like ghosts themselves: engaged in secret work which must not be named, holed up away from the world so that they are all but forgotten, operating entirely within their own temporal and spatial vacuum so that 'this felt like their fortieth Christmas in each other's society' (184). Mr Rankstock, Mr Winterslow, Miss Bates, and the others, are dead to all others besides themselves. Mr Rankstock even enters the room in the story's first line, 'with a dragging tread' and a 'muted groan,' also in imitation of a ghost (182). And as Mr Winterslow also admits, 'There *are* moments when I don't quite know where I am' (188).

Now, they have been moved to another, even more remote house, where this is their first Christmas. This house, Mopsam Grange, has until their arrival 'stood empty: one had not to ask why' (184). The house is marked by 'traces' of its former anonymous inhabitants (185), marked by something 'fishy,' Miss Bates observes (187): these traces soon become far more sinister, for Mr Winterslow is being haunted by a ghost who has fallen in love with him. This ghost, like her new housemates, is trapped in the time of her own death, following the suicide of her husband, whose blood runs eternally, for her, over the tiles at the bottom of the stairs. For the ghost, it is perpetually Christmas Eve—the time, we will recall, for unsettled spirits.

The counteracting fear in 'Green Holly,' then, is that the ghosts and the nominally alive people have now been subsumed into the same temporal plane: there is no distinction between life and death anymore. 'It is the haunted who haunt,' the narrator observes (189). Both ghost and people are haunted and haunting, unsettled and perpetually in-between. Indeed, the green holly itself points to this: there is no holly with berries available, Miss Bates complains early on: 'the birds have eaten them' (182). Given that the berries on holly as a Christmas symbol signify blood, not only has the blood—or the life—been drained from this scene, all that is left are the green leaves, that which symbolises eternity, the horrific eternity in which the inhabitants of the house are trapped. In emphasis of this, the group engage in a circular conversation, such that the complaint about the holly both begins and ends the story. There is no escape from this death in life of the wartime worker, and the horrific reality of the 'ideal timeless repetition of Christmas' (Kuper: 170).

'The Cheery Soul' is a little stranger since, as Bowen herself points out, its ghosts are subjective, rather than definite, as in 'Green Holly.' In this story, an unnamed man has been invited to the home of some professional acquaintances, siblings, who have their 'noses in everything' to do with the war production scene ('The Cheery Soul': 71). But his arrival is anything but the Christmas welcome he had pictured. The siblings are not there, leaving behind only an old aunt, who has been forced to leave Italy (her usual location there is also a clue to their behaviour):

> It could not be said that the room was cheerful: the high, curtained bow windows made draughty caves; the armchairs and sofas, pushed back against

> the wall, wore the air of being renounced for ever. Only a row of discreet greeting-cards (few with pictures) along the top of a bureau betrayed the presence of Christmas. There was no holly, and no pieces of string. (59)

The man's horror and disbelief in the poor welcome he has received is exacerbated by his hunger, and the evident lack of a hot meal, or any preparations for one the next day. The cook herself is also missing. The bedrooms are cold, and although he finds a room that appears to be ready for him, someone has been sleeping in his bed—the missing cook, he presumes. There is a sense in which the former cook haunts the house: she was, perhaps, murdered for knowing too much, and now appears in the house via mysterious notes—such as one which enigmatically states, 'I am not here' (65)—and indentations in the guest bedding.

But I also want to suggest that the ghost here appears to be Christmas itself, stripped of all significance, destroyed and exploited by, it seems, foreign spies who have used the English festive season against the English themselves. The horror of the failure to observe Christmas appropriately is part of what caused the former cook to leave so abruptly, and is also what is most upsetting to the narrator: that is the disruption of middle-class order in which everything for Christmas should be just so. The hollowness of Christmas to the sibling spies also indicates their non-Englishness, and thus, in this time of war, their threat. The siblings have invited the narrator to their home for Christmas, knowing that in his excitement he would tell everyone he knows. While their acquaintances are thus assuming that they are accounted for and won't notice their disappearance, the spies quietly leave the country. The fear, here, is thus an anxiety about the loss of Christmas, the loss of what it means to be English, that would result should England lose the war. This is not merely a question of discomfort and inhospitality, but the death of England and of Englishness, which would make the narrator, the cheery soul himself, also a ghost, no longer relevant, no longer in existence.

In this discussion of Bowen's Christmas writing, and especially her Christmas ghost stories, I've traced an opposition between her Christmas essays, which emphasise and celebrate Christmas and Christian tradition, and the Christmas stories, which are concerned about the loss of this. At their core, then, Bowen's Christmas ghost stories, all of which are written either during or after the Second World War, not only seek to account for a changing and uncertain world, but make space for a fear about what the world of the future might be. Christmas, as a marker of tradition, ritual, and community, is the ideal symbol to imagine, fear, and mourn that loss, even as the Christmas candle burns determinedly on.

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