

A Study on the Traumatic Theme in Elizabeth Bowen's "The Demon Lover"

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Abstract: British novelist Elizabeth Bowen tactfully sets the fate of individuals in the spectacular background of war in her short novel "The Demon Lover" to depict the physical and psychological trauma of human beings. The protagonists Kathleen Drover and the "demon" soldier who returns for revenge are two typical sufferers of trauma. The writing of the trauma in this novel not only recreates daily life of British women during the war but also draws readers' attention on the cruelty of war, which endow the short story abundant significance of enlightenment to individuals and society.

Key words: Trauma; The Demon Lover; Elizabeth Bowen; war; Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

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1 Introduction

Trauma is a concept introduced from clinical medicine to humanities and social disciplines such as literature, history and psychology. Cathy Caruth sums up the definition of trauma: "Pathology exists only in its empirical structure or feeling. Rather than being fully absorbed or experienced at the time, the event was delayed, manifested in repeated attacks on someone who had experienced it. Thus, to suffer a mental trauma is precisely to be controlled by a form or an event." (Caruth 4) As can be seen from the definition of trauma, the impact of trauma on its subject is not the traumatic event itself, but the subject's reaction after the trauma. Unlike an easily healed wound in the body, a traumatic event is too sudden, intense, rapid, and unexpected to be immediately accepted and fully understood by the mind. If such event repeats, the injured will be affected. The violence and suddenness of the event leave the traumatic victim's brain unprepared for the shocking experience and unable to feel pain or anxiety when it happened. This delayed response is called post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In *the Demon Lover*, the protagonists Kathleen Drover and the "demon" soldier manifest the symptoms of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder). However, the trauma rooted in their physical body and soul is provoked by various elements. By investigating the two characters' trauma and the plight in which they are trapped readers can have a profound

understanding of women's life status in Britain Victorian society as well as soldiers' spiritual world after the warfare.

2 Kathleen Drover's Trauma

Three core clinical symptoms of PTSD are revealed in Mrs. Drover: the intrusive symptoms, avoidance symptoms and increased alertness symptoms. First, the intrusive symptoms are characterized by uncontrollable repeated experiences of traumatic situations in various forms, making the patient extremely miserable. In the short story, the flashback to the youth period is a typical example. In Bowen's description, the dating with the fiancé in the garden is not pleasant at all. On the contrary, dominated by her lover, the protagonist is swallowed by a sense of depression and instability. "Now and then—for it felt, from not seeing him at this intense moment, as though she had never seen him at all.....Being not kissed, being drawn away from and looked at intimidated Kathleen till she imagined spectral glitters in the place of his eyes"(Bowen 2). In the narration it is obvious that the protagonist Kathleen feels alienated with her fiancé psychologically. One detail explains the detachment: there is no intimacy such as kiss or hug between the couple at the moment of parting. To a certain degree, Kathleen fears the soldier and is intimidated to keep the promise which is considered as "sinister" by the protagonist. Second, the avoidance symptom means the sufferer continue to avoid trauma-related stimuli after a traumatic event. In this short

story, the sudden letter on the desk is a stimulus that arouses Kathleen's reflection. After reading the letter, Kathleen tries to avoid and forget the existence of this letter from the "demon". "To rally herself, she (Kathleen) said she was in a mood—and for two or three seconds shutting her eyes, told herself that she had imagined the letter"(Bowen 3). Faced with the letter, Kathleen ponders over the origin of the secret letter but finally chooses a negative way of escape. This psychological description reveals Kathleen's refusing to recapture the bad memories about the soldier and the troth. Third, Mrs. Drover manifest a high level of alertness after reading the letter from the "demon", which reflects her state of "combat" in her long history of trauma. "Her lips, beneath the remains of lipstick, were beginning to go white. She felt so much the change in her own face that she sent to the mirror.....She rose from the chair and went over and locked the door."(Bowen 3) From the depictions of Kathleen's behaviors and expressions, readers could clearly see the fact that Kathleen is extremely terrified of the soldier so that she tries to escape from the "demon" by the instinct.

Kathleen's trauma is attributed to the phallogocentrism prevailing in Britain society in the 20th century. Phallogocentrism is a term used in feminist criticism and deconstructivism, which asserts that men are authority while women are in a subordinate position.(Wang 178) Kathleen's origin of fear--the "demon lover", is merely a miniature of phallogocentrism. He does not care about Kathleen's feelings and invisibly forces her to keep the promise. When the couple parts in the garden, the soldier's attitude is rather detached and cold. His response to Kathleen symbolizes a dominated and imperative attitude. "You(Kathleen) don't have to.....I(soldier) shall be with you.....sooner or later. You won't forget that. You need do nothing but wait." With regard to Kathleen's question how far he would go, the soldier does not give a specific answer at all but merely commands his lover to be a compliant embracer. Therefore, dominated by the soldier, Kathleen does not feel at ease. For example, when Kathleen accepts the promise, she does not feel voluntary but coercive. "No other way of having given herself could have made her feel so apart, lost and forsworn. She could not have plighted a more sinister troth." (Bowen 3) Kathleen's attitude toward the "troth" is negative and repulsive. On one hand, "apart, lost and forsworn" reveals that Kathleen's choice violates against her own will. On the other hand, she depends heavily on the men. When the soldier leaves, Kathleen is at a loss over the future and cries because the "center" of her life

has gone away. This point explains why Kathleen is anxious to push herself out when she hears the news that the soldier died and why she is greatly relieved when courted by William Drover. Although Kathleen's lover has changed from the soldier to another man, the focus of Kathleen's life never alternate essentially. She is still the follower and victim of phallogocentrism.

Kathleen Drover's trauma reflects the phallogocentrism prevailing in the whole Victorian period. In the second half of the 19th century, the social status of British women was lower than that of men. As stated in *the Western Heritage* edited by Donald Kagan and other scholars, "Generally speaking, no matter which class women are in, they are economically dependent and legally vulnerable groups."(Kagan 1979) In other words, the society was still male-centered. As one of millions of ordinary housewives in Britain, Kathleen Drover exposes the inequality at status between men and women.

3 The Soldier's Trauma

There also exist typical symptoms of PTSD on the "demon" soldier though the writer does not give much concrete descriptions about him. First, he gives off a sense of lifelessness and indifference in the characterization, which is a typical clinical symptom of trauma. For instance, when faced with his lover, the soldier does not show any kindness or tenderness. On the contrary, he displays indifference and domination in his words and deeds. "She (Kathleen) verified his presence for these few moments longer by putting out a hand, which he each time pressed, without very much kindness, and painfully, on to one of the breast buttons of his uniform. That cut of the button on the palm of her hand was, principally, what she was to carry away."(Bowen 3) The cut pressed by the button in the palm symbolizes the pains brought by the soldier, which implies that the soldier does not care about the effects of his behaviors on Kathleen. With regard to the character's life experience, the soldier might has become numb and even lost the ability to feel pains due to his grave sufferings in the First World War. As a soldier amid the flames of war, he must have been accustomed to acute pains by the bullet and sword, let alone the pains caused by pressing. Second, the soldier is abundant of aggressiveness, which is also a mark of PTSD. In the ending, the mad behaviors of the soldier expose his aggressivity. "The driver braked to what was almost a stop, turned round, and slid the glass panel back: the jolt of this flung Mrs. Drover forward till her face was almost into the glass.....After that she continued to scream

freely and to beat with her gloved hands on the glass all round as the taxi, accelerating without mercy, made off with her into the hinterland of deserted streets”(Bowen 5). Obviously the braking is deliberately made by the driver as a revenge, through which he can also regain his control over Kathleen Drover. In addition, the subsequent speeding-up displays the great intensity of aggressivity and hostility from the soldier. The trauma rooted in the soldier’s heart for such a long time eventually explodes in an unguarded moment.

As for Mrs. Drover, the soldier is a perpetrator, but in real life he is a victim of the war at the same time. There is a hidden clue about two world wars running through *The Demon Lover*; which implies that the characterization is closely related with the social background in the war time. In the novel, the image of the “demon” lover always associates with the war. When the “demon” was in the love affair with the heroine, he was a soldier who went to France with the British army to fight in the First World War. When the war is over, he disappears. World War II broke out in 1940, and the following year he reappeared secretly in the heroine's life. What makes a difference is not the question whether the soldier is alive, but the fact that his psychic trauma is rooted in the fighting in the war. It is the war machine that indirectly leads him to be as cold as iron and resorts to revenge his lover after 25 years. First of all, war highlights power and conquering, possessing and plundering. (Gao 2007)The war machine is cold, violent, bringing death. Therefore the “demon” lover in the novel also becomes cold and cruel under the influence of war and does not know how to be tender and compassionate. Moreover, soldiers in the battlefield fight against the enemies without any hesitation because of the promise they have made to their own country and people. It will be a great shame if a soldier abandons his promise and loyalty to the country. In the span of 25 years, the Second World War might be the immediate flashpoint that prompts “demon” lover sparing no effort to break into Mrs. Drover's house without permission and abduct her by force. In the soldier’s mind, Mrs. Drover is considered as a renegade in their relationship; therefore she is supposed to be punished in a violent way. This attack is not only revenge but also an outlet of his psychic trauma in the war.

4 Conclusion

The trauma of the two characters in the story not only belongs to them, but belongs to a large group of people in 20th century. Under the traumatic theme of the text there lies the evil fruits of phallogocentrism and cruel wars, and these two elements are eternal theme in human history. Therefore, through the trauma writing in literature, readers can peer human’s lives in the past and the imprint of power in history. In the meantime, by analyzing the survival experience of the traumas carried by the characters in the works from the trauma narrative given in the text, readers are available to explore the lessons from the characters’ sufferings in various traumatic events. By exploring the trauma of works of art, readers can reflect on their own words and deeds while experiencing the trauma of works of art, and guide themselves away from various sufferings. (Li 2010) In this sense, the writing of trauma in literary works confirms Nietzsche's view that "life saves itself through art".

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