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### **"Reread me backwards": Deciphering the Past in Elizabeth Bowen's The Heat of the Day**

Set during the midst of the London Blitz, Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* revolves around a narrative of espionage, but unlike many novels from the spy genre, it refuses to disclose all of its secrets. Instead, the novel's dense and complex language, which so effectively expresses the dislocating effects of a city under attack, resists an easy or uncomplicated reading. This article examines the motif of reading within the novel, which manifests when its protagonist, Stella Rodney, learns her lover Robert is a Nazi spy. In her efforts to locate proof of his defection, Stella becomes caught in a recurrent but indeterminable task of rereading past events, a movement which attempts to remember the past but also foregrounds a fundamental inability to ever wholly resolve its enigmas. When Stella fails to read her past for lost clues, she is prevented from viewing the events of her life as a coherent and meaningful narrative. The novel's difficult language reflects this lack of resolution, refusing to assimilate the events it depicts into a straightforward account. With its wartime setting as a disorienting backdrop, *The Heat of the Day* undermines the purpose of reading as the discovery of sense and meaning, producing instead only more questions and mysteries.

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In the summer of 1944, Elizabeth Bowen commenced work on a novel that attempted to capture the anxious and fearful atmosphere of the London Blitz. At that time, the Anglo-Irish author was living in London, and although the city was experiencing a brief reprieve from the attacks, when Bowen began writing, the bombs started falling once more. After her house in the suburb of Regent's Park was hit, Bowen came to feel that the stress of that "V-1 summer" would affect the quality of the novel and did not finish it until 1948 (Glendinning 187). Through its experimental, elliptical prose, this novel, which would eventually become *The Heat of the Day*, induces the anxiety and psychological fragmentation that bespeaks the shattered tenor of wartime London. The novel revolves around a narrative of espionage, which heightens the chaos and suspense of the Blitz, but unlike many novels from the spy genre, it does not reveal all of its secrets. Instead, the novel's dense and complex language, which so effectively expresses the dislocating effects of a city under attack, resists an easy or uncomplicated reading. In response to its challenging language, critics have referred to *The Heat of the Day* as Bowen's "most difficult" novel (Lassner 120). It is, moreover, not only the novel's readers that struggle with the act of reading, but also its characters: reading is figured as an impenetrable process by its protagonist, Stella Rodney, who learns her lover, Robert, may be a Nazi spy. In her efforts to locate proof of his defection, Stella becomes caught in a recurrent but indeterminable task of rereading past events, a movement which attempts to remember the past but also foregrounds a fundamental inability to ever wholly resolve its enigmas. When Stella fails to read her past for lost clues, she

is prevented from suturing the events of her life together into a coherent and meaningful narrative. Without this integrated account of her life, Stella lacks the closure she needs to comprehend Robert's betrayal. The novel's difficult language reflects this lack of resolution, refusing to assimilate the events it depicts into a straightforward account. With its wartime setting as a disorienting backdrop, *The Heat of the Day* undermines the purpose of reading as the discovery of sense and meaning, producing instead only more questions and mysteries.

Much of the novel's suspense comes less from its action than it does from the psychological strain Stella undergoes as she tries to deduce Robert's true identity. Early in the novel, Stella is approached by a mysterious man called Harrison, who tells her that Robert is a Nazi spy. After revealing himself to be a counterspy working for the British government, Harrison attempts to bribe Stella by telling her he will not arrest Robert if she agrees to leave Robert for him instead. In the remainder of the novel, Stella attempts to hide her suspicions from Robert, though she covertly observes him for signs of his defection. Eventually, Robert confesses that he is indeed a spy for Germany. When he tries to flee from Harrison by hiding on the rooftop of Stella's apartment, he either accidentally falls or purposefully jumps to his death; the text leaves the true nature of his death unanswered.

The process of reading and comprehending this surface-level plot is often destabilized by Bowen's syntax, which tortuously winds around double and even triple negatives, such as when Stella waits for Harrison to arrive at her apartment and wonders whether or not he will take her out to dinner: "his not having said so gave her no chance of saying she would on no account dine with him" (21). In this moment, Stella regrets not having the opportunity to rebuff an invitation that has not even been extended. Bowen frequently crafts such labyrinthine constructions to convey negative expressions, particularly those that deal with death and loss. In another striking passage, the novel describes the ever-growing number of citizens killed during the Blitz:

Most of all the dead, from mortuaries, from under cataracts of rubble, made their anonymous presence – not as today's dead but as yesterday's living – felt through London. . . . Absent from the routine which had been life, they stamped upon that routine their absence – not knowing who the dead were, you could not know which might be the staircase somebody for the first time was not mounting this morning, or at which street corner the newsvendor missed a face, or which trains and buses in the homegoing rush were this evening lighter by at least one passenger. (99)

These lines are significant not only for how they convey Bowen's complex syntax, but also in how they point to dislocating instances of absence and loss that pervade the novel. Bowen interrupts the phrase of making "presence felt" with her use of dashes, which at once calls attention to the absent presence of the dead and seems to impede any such presence from really being fully felt. Even as the dead imprint their presence on the continuing routine of life, another dash heightens the passage's contradictory effects and introduces an unknown second-person voice ("you could not know"). The dead impress their absence on ordinary details, altering the routine, but since "you" do not know who the dead are, you cannot know which part of the routine has changed. Others, such as the newsvendor, might know, but this knowledge is always held at bay. Though the absence of the dead has an effect, this effect is itself absent since the particular dead cannot be known.

Due to passages such as this one, Bowen's writing in *The Heat of the Day* has been called "highly strained," to the point where her syntactical mannerisms cause her readers to become "uncomfortable" (Lee 164-65). Daniel George Bunting, Bowen's reader at Jonathan Cape

Publishing, feared the novel's readers would "be baffled completely" (Howard 181).<sup>1</sup> In response to such criticisms, Bowen defended her complicated style, writing in a letter to Jonathan Cape: "I'd rather keep the jars, 'jingles' and awkwardness – e.g. 'seemed unseemly', 'felt to falter'. They do to my mind express something. In some cases I want the rhythm to jerk or jar – to an extent, even, which may displease the reader" (qtd. in Ellmann 166). Despite its unsettling and disorienting effects, the novel's language does indeed "express something;" his reservations notwithstanding, Bunting went on to say that Bowen "succeeds time and again in expressing what has hitherto been inexpressible" (182). It is, ironically, the novel's very unreadability that allows it to articulate an experience of war that seems to lie outside the bounds of conventional language.

The novel's difficult language is bound up with the act of reading, and by extension, with the act of interpretation – processes that tie into the critical reception of *The Heat of the Day*. The novel is frequently read through two interpretative frameworks: one which posits it as a response to the trauma of war, and one which views it as Bowen's "spy novel."<sup>2</sup> As a recurring motif within the novel, the acts of reading and rereading link these two approaches, as each rests on the novel's essential unreadability in order to highlight Bowen's focus on the loss of meaning. Scholars who focus on *The Heat of the Day* as a response to the Second World War frequently view its complicated syntax as a means of reinforcing the violent and disruptive effects of the London bombings. As Phyllis Lassner says, in wartime "the language of conventional fictions becomes an inadequate tool of self-expression . . . Language in this novel communicates only uncertainty" (123). Bowen's descriptions of the bombings prompt Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle to refer to *The Heat of the Day* as an example of "blitz-writing" (94). Jessica Gildersleeve likewise reads the narrative as reverberating with the "shuddering motion" of "a city at war" (114).

Readings of *The Heat of the Day* as a spy novel also focus on Bowen's tangled syntax. Spy narratives typically progress from apparently disparate fragments of information towards a more complete account of events. According to David Seed, such novels tend to "symbolically re-enact the establishment of a desired order threatened by malign forces" (121). Suspense and uncertainty build as the main protagonist works to solve a mystery, which is usually revealed with a satisfying sense of resolution. While *The Heat of the Day* challenges the spy narrative's conventional efforts to achieve closure, its language is bound up with the creation of suspense. As Anna Teekell says, "The structure of the double negative governs *The Heat of the Day* and underpins the novel's logic; it creates a space of suspense, of non-knowingness. Such negative grammar is symbolic of the novel's espionage-based epistemology: it is the grammar of Stella's refusal to believe Harrison's story, and her refusal to disbelieve it as well" (63).

It is this same syntactical structure, however, that undermines the spy novel's expository function. In his study of the genre, Alan Hepburn explains, "Espionage plots provide rules for their decipherment, a user's guide as it were, to help the fit reader read aright. Figured as games or puzzles, espionage narratives blur meaningful details with meaningless details. Interpretation requires vigilant separation of truth from lies" (xvi). *The Heat of the Day* confounds these expectations; there is no way to "read aright" in this novel. Not only does its language prevent

<sup>1</sup> Bunting made four pages of notes that list some of the novel's most distressingly worded passages. He refers to Bowen's phrase "has been to be seen seeing", for instance, as "the pluperfect syphon" (182).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Patrick Deer, *Culture in Camouflage: War, Empire, and Modern British Literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 184; and Megan Faragher, "The Form of Modernist Propaganda in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*", *Textual Practice* 21.7 (2013): 49-68.

such a reading, the novel's central mysteries – including Robert's presumed identity as a Nazi spy and the secretive nature of his death – are not so easily disclosed. It is in this ambiguity that the two readings of *The Heat of the Day* as a spy novel and as a war novel coincide. As scenes of war filter through the novel, they distort the process of looking for clues to find the truth. Rather than reestablish order and truth, Bowen's writing emphasizes a loss of certainty that she does not try to fill or replace.

One central way in which Bowen calls attention to this loss is through the question of whether or not the past can be "read" for clues. When Robert finally confesses his betrayal to Stella, he tells her: "You'll have to reread me backwards, figure me out – you will have years to do that in, if you want to" (304). Robert intimates that Stella must retrospectively examine and reinterpret their relationship to locate possible evidence of his defection. His words recall Franco Moretti's assertion that spy fiction is driven by a compulsion to "return to the beginning," the point where the mystery first began in order to solve it (137). Robert seemingly implies that Stella may inspect their shared past and locate fragments of information that, when considered together, add up to reveal the narrative of his deception. Yet the novel engages with the act of rereading on a more problematic and profound level than simply recalling the past in order to locate an explanation. As it is figured in the text, the process of rereading conceals rather than uncovers motive and meaning.

Instead of presenting a past littered with clues waiting to be reread and reinterpreted, *The Heat of the Day* depicts an enigmatic past that may never be fully known. Robert and Stella's first meeting calls into question their very perceptions of the reality of the past. When they approach one another in either a crowded "bar or club – afterwards they could never remember which," they "both spoke at once, unheard" (103, 104). As they begin to speak, a plane drops a bomb on a nearby building, leaving Stella and Robert speechless from the force of the detonation:

It was the demolition of an entire moment: he and she stood at attention till the glissade stopped. What they *had* both been saying, or been on the point of saying, neither of them ever now were to know. Most first words have the nature of being trifling; theirs from having been lost began to have the significance of a lost clue. What they said next, what they said instead, they forgot: there are questions which if not asked at the start are not asked later; so those they never did ask. (104)

Although the moment of the blast leaves a trace in the form of a "lost clue," the passage questions whether this clue ever existed in the first place. Instead, the idea of the clue serves as a façade that gives weight and structure to a forgotten and irrevocable moment conditioned by traumatic experience. The loss of this moment eclipses any tangible, intelligible words, as the blast causes them to forget "what they said instead." What is more, the loss this passage describes is suggested even before the explosion occurs. An instance of unintelligibility arises in the moment leading up to the detonation when Stella and Robert "both speak at once, unheard." Speaking simultaneously, they cannot make out the other's words. While the bomb serves to underscore the loss of language, memory, and experience that characterizes the traumatic occurrence of Stella and Robert's meeting, their first words had already been lost. Although this smaller moment is not as noticeably disorienting as the falling bomb, the explosion highlights the possibilities of loss that already resided in their first meeting. With its shattering force, the bomb causes an upheaval that gives the incomprehensibility of their first words a significant and impenetrable valence, for it prevents them from moving past that moment and starting their conversation anew. As such, it is not only the physical force of the bomb that they feel, but also the force of this loss, which comes to define their relationship. The idea of the missing clue, as a long-lost desire,

attempts to locate an inaugurating moment that never existed and attains its significance through its very absence.

It is the inaccessibility of this first moment that prompts Stella to go in search for it, and yet her search will never amount to more than a futile attempt to find a clue that cannot be found. The event of Stella and Robert's first meeting is signalled through the awareness that something has happened that cannot really be understood, and therefore it cannot be read. As Stella considers events from her past, she muses:

One could only suppose that the apparently forgotten beginning of any story was unforgettable; perpetually one was subject to the sense of there having had to be a beginning *somewhere*. Like the lost first sheet of a letter or missing first pages of a book, the beginning kept on suggesting what must have been its nature. One never was out of reach of the power of what had been written first. Call it what you liked, call it a miscarried love, it imparted, or was always ready and liable to impart, the nature of an alternative, attempted recovery or enforced second start to whatever followed. The beginning, in which was conceived the end, could not but continue to shape the middle part of the story, so that none of the realisations along that course were what had been expected, quite whole, quite final. (146)

This passage foregrounds the paradoxical forgetting of what should be unforgettable, so that the story's beginning remains unknown even as its impact continues to be felt. The forgotten beginning registers only through its later effects, in its capability to "shape" the rest of the story. With the past figured as a book without its first pages, the notion of reading back for lost clues resurfaces. Bennett and Royle argue *The Heat of the Day* is paradigmatic of what they call the "retrolexic," which they define as "a work of rereading or re-experiencing" that involves "remembering what never happened. In this way the retrolexic engages with a demand for reading back, for 'rereading backwards', for a rereading which at once doubles and obliterates any 'first reading' . . . It is a demand which, while figuring the starting-point of reading or experience, cannot itself be situated" (89). In considering the novel as a retrolexic text, Bennett and Royle raise the important question of whether Bowen presents a past that has any grounding in reality.

However, the novel does not just foreground the process of reading back; it also considers the implications this process has for the future. Even as Stella's forgotten beginnings persuade her to reread for moments that were possibly never there at all, their absence maintains a strong hold on what is to come. As Stella phrases it in the passage above, "One was never out of reach of the power of what had been written first." Without the beginning, the story is never "quite whole, quite final." Instead, it remains ineluctably entangled with the missed or forgotten moment of origin. Since the story's beginning has never been rendered fully present, its ending will remain profoundly unresolved. Reading and rereading do not, then, fully elucidate the unknowable events in Stella's past, but instead engender even more mysteries. Since the lingering ambiguities instigate further acts of rereading, Stella thus becomes immersed in a recurrent and unfulfilled process of decryption and decipherment.

The missing beginning therefore has implications for the story's end, or in the case of Stella's life, for her future. In particular, the novel resists closure, so that the events of Stella's life are bookended with uncertainty, as is evidenced by her complicated relationship with Harrison. After Robert dies, Harrison flees without contacting Stella. Since Harrison was trailing Robert on the night of his death, he is the only person who knows whether or not Robert purposefully jumped or accidentally fell to his death. Thinking of Harrison, Stella realizes that with "their extraordinary relationship having ended in midair, she found she missed it – Harrison

became the one living person she would have given anything to see. Ultimately, it was *his* silent absence which left her with absolutely nothing. She never, then, *was* to know what had happened?" (339-40). Like the notion of the forgotten beginning that persists in haunting Stella, Robert's death continues to be felt in its aftermath and is specifically experienced through its very irresolution and unknowability. Any meaning Stella may try to find in his death cannot be finalized, as Harrison's departure leaves her bereft and wondering. For Stella, it is not the "silent absence" of the dead that plagues her, but of the living, and yet she thinks of Harrison in a way that might befit a dead person: silent, out of reach, beyond knowledge or communication. Without him, Stella comes to identify a loss of meaning and knowledge that refuses to be reclaimed.

Harrison's absence leaves Stella searching her memory for clues of Robert's criminal past, "piecing and repiecing it together to try and make out something they had not time to say – possibly even had not had time to know. There still must be something that matters that one has forgotten, forgotten because at the time one did not realize how much it did matter. Yet most of all there is something one has got to forget – that is, if it is to be possible to live" (358). Stella's lack of closure causes her to revisit her relationship with Robert, and she attempts to "reread [Robert] backwards" after all. What she finds, however, is that there is nothing tangible in their past to read. If evidence of Robert's defection ever existed in the first place, Stella has forgotten it. Once again, Stella is left only with the suspicion that the trace of Robert's espionage must linger somewhere, even if such evidence remains just out of her line of sight. Although Stella wishes to remember, her statement "most of all there is something one has to forget – that is, if it is to be possible to live" aligns the process of recovery with the ability to forget.

In order to recover from Robert's death, Stella seems to need to engage with what Jay Winter calls "the necessary art of forgetting," or the process of separating from one's loss to begin to live again (115). Winter's view of the productive nature of forgetting is based on Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia. Freud defines mourning as an essential process for recovery, through which the mourning individual eventually comes to terms with the loss. He characterizes melancholia, by contrast, as an arrested process in which the depressed and self-loathing individual continues to narcissistically identify with the lost person or object.<sup>3</sup> Trapped in such a state, the melancholic individual remains haunted by the past, unable to disassociate from what has been lost. Even as Stella expresses a desire to forget, her repeated efforts to read the past for lost clues prevent her from doing so. Without the missing pieces of her relationship with Robert, she grieves over a loss she cannot fully comprehend. Her melancholy, furthermore, does not center on her loss of Robert so much as it does on her inability to know what happened in the past, and it enfolds her unrelentingly because she will never know ("she never, then, *was* to know"). Stella's dilemma reflects a crucial and paradoxical aspect of traumatic forgetting: although she strives to remember what has been forgotten, she needs to forget in order to heal. And yet her impulse to keep reading back causes her to repeatedly encounter the frustrated trace of what she has forgotten or "possibly had not had time to know." The act of rereading prevents her state of melancholy from coming to an end; her failed efforts to reread the past maintain her loss and prevent her from achieving a measure of resolution.

Stella's profound lack of closure is structurally reinforced by the novel's narrative, which never discloses the truth of the events that burden her. When Harrison suddenly returns, Stella implores him to fill in the gaps in her memory. Although she repeatedly asks him to explain,

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<sup>3</sup> As Freud says in his landmark essay "Mourning and Melancholia," "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (246).

"What happened?", Harrison only replies, "I don't remember" (358, 361). He withholds any possibility that Stella will achieve closure for Robert's death, the true cause of which remains a mystery to both Stella and Bowen's readers. Without any further knowledge of whether Robert jumped or fell, Stella makes one final attempt to find closure as she tells Harrison, "I've wanted to be able to say goodbye to you: till this could be possible you've haunted me. What's unfinished haunts one; what's unhealed haunts one" (362). Her words reiterate her need to heal and reflect the haunting effects caused by her inability to re-read her past. Stella's experiences continue to possess her precisely because she cannot know them, and while it looks as though she never will, it is also uncertain if she will receive the goodbye from Harrison that she so strongly desires. In the midst of Stella and Harrison's conversation, an air raid strike begins and prevents Harrison from leaving. As their conversation continues, Harrison shifts the focus away from Robert and onto Stella by questioning her about her future. She demurs, ending their exchange as follows:

"I always have left things open. –As a matter of fact, though, I think the raid's over."  
 "In that case..." said Harrison, looking at his watch. "Or would you rather I stayed till the All Clear?" (363)

The passage cuts off with Harrison's question, forestalling the moment of his departure. The narrative thereby suspends the possibility of closure on two levels: in terms of its content, Stella receives no closure for the circumstances surrounding Robert's death, and in terms of its form, the novel refuses closure by denying its readers the knowledge of whether or not Stella's desired goodbye to Harrison ever takes place. With their goodbye held in abeyance, this moment, like Stella's life, is "left open." Bowen's narrative does not yield to a simple understanding; it does not offer a transparent flash of knowledge that transmits meaning or closure. Instead, in its interminable process of rereading and its refusal to reveal the truth of the mystery it describes, *The Heat of the Day* conveys a darker, murkier, and more dubious representation of closure and healing.

Stella's efforts to read and reread her past, then, remain unfinished and imperfect, unsettling the notion that she may locate long-lost clues in order to reveal the truth of Robert's betrayal. The novel's apprehensive stance on the act of reading is further echoed in a subplot involving Louie, a young, working-class woman, and her friend, Connie. As an avid reader of newspapers, Connie is described in the novel as a careful and assiduous reader:

Connie's reading of papers was for the most part suspicious; nothing was to get by unobserved by her. Her re-reading of everything was the more impressive because the second time, you were given to understand, what she was doing was reading between the lines. So few having this gift, she felt it devolved on her to use it, and was therefore a tiger for information. As to the ideas (as Louie now called the articles), Connie was a tooth-sucker, a keeper of open mind – they were welcome to sell her anything they could. (170)

Newspapers, as they are depicted here, cannot be completely trusted to explicitly convey the truth, and yet Connie's diligent rereading seems to posit an active process of reading that may discern whatever truth lies "between the lines." Like the spy narrative, the newspapers potentially contain a secret meaning that may be uncovered through the practice of close and vigilant reading. The interpretative process of reading would thus be generated by the hidden meanings that lay within the papers. For Connie, the belief that the articles contain tacit messages serves as a condition of possibility for the act of rereading itself. In other words, this belief spurs her to move beyond a surface-level reading of the newspaper's content, probing the articles to unlock a

wealth of hidden information. The papers, furthermore, do not merely present facts, but according to Louie, the articles represent "ideas," underlying concepts and impressions that one could discern with an "open mind."

While Connie and Louie's attitude initially presumes an approach to rereading that seems to reveal the truth of the matter, the novel quickly undercuts this assumption. After Robert dies, Stella is called to give testimony at an inquest into his death. Although Stella attempts to recall the details of the night Robert died to the best of her ability, she does not mention Harrison or reveal Robert's espionage in an effort to preserve Robert's reputation. In this passage, Bowen presents only Stella's answers to the questions put before her and not the questions themselves, although the court's inquiries about Robert and his relationship with Stella can be inferred from her responses. The following lines are representative of Stella's testimony:

"Yes, I have other men friends, I suppose... I beg your pardon; I mean yes, I have other men friends" (340).

"Yes, I have always tried to keep some drink in my flat, never to run quite out of it: one needs it" (340).

"No, I do not remember drinking more heavily than usual... As far as I know, absolutely clear: I remember everything... Is it unusual? I have a good memory" (341).

"No, I cannot remember whether he was carrying an electric torch: he did not usually... Yes, I'm sorry; I agree that that is important. I must withdraw my statement that I remember everything" (342).

Stella's testimony continues in this vein for over three pages, and while her nervous, somewhat faltering responses convey the details of that night as she knows them, her words are misread: they generate false impressions regarding her conduct and personality. Drawing from the records of the inquest, the press misinterprets and incorrectly reports Stella's testimony, wrongly inferring that Stella drinks heavily and entertains "other men friends" besides Robert. By pointing to the inability to ever "remember everything" completely, Stella's statements destabilize one of the central purposes of the inquest, which is to uncover the truth based on her testimony. While she successfully prevents the court from suspecting Robert's treason, she unwittingly misrepresents herself. The truth about Stella and Robert's relationship is therefore buried beneath two falsehoods: the lie Stella purposefully tells by concealing Robert's defection and the mistake the newspapers make regarding her conduct.

Despite the "suspicious" form of rereading Connie endorses, the falsehoods in Stella's testimony take on the appearance of truth as the newspapers disseminate the story. Louie, who meets and comes to admire Stella earlier in the novel, concludes after reading the news, "She had seemed so respectable . . . but there she had stood in court, telling them all. That was that; simply that again. There was nobody to admire: there *was* no alternative" (346). Given credibility by the newspapers, the story of "Stella's fall," as Louie thinks of it, becomes reduced to a single, seemingly indisputable fact. Though Stella's fall is, in this sense, metaphorical, it recalls Robert's fall to his death since the truth behind neither event is ever fully disclosed. Coinciding with Stella's fall, however, is a deceptively false narrative that takes the place of and imitates truth. The newspapers disseminate a totalizing reading of Stella's testimony, which does not, in the end, incite the act of rereading. Instead, the newspaper article's account solidifies into a dangerous idea for Louie, one that does not require extra scrutiny. With "no alternative" interpretation, there is no need for her to read back. The newspaper reports lull Louie into a counterfeit sense of closure that distorts the events of Stella's life rather than disclose them.



Like Stella's unfulfilled efforts to reread her past for clues of Robert's defection, Louie's reading of the newspapers refuses to divulge the truth. By undermining the act of reading, *The Heat of the Day* renders the search for knowledge and meaning ceaselessly incomplete, resulting in a profound lack of closure for both Stella and its readers. As the novel confounds Stella's attempts to reread her past for lost clues, it presents a character who is mercilessly plagued by unknown and forgotten events. Through its very absence of resolution, furthermore, the novel speaks to the recurring and melancholic quality of Stella's experience, as her compulsion to revisit the past generates an irresolvable temporal dilemma from which she cannot escape. Try as she might to read her past again and again, rereading backwards remains an incessant, indeterminable act that accentuates the impossibility of ever returning to, or fully deciphering, the past.

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