

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Last September (1929)

Elizabeth Bowen

OVERVIEW

At the center of this novel is a traditional story of a girl, Lois Farquar, emerging into womanhood, navigating suitors, contemplating marriage, and exploring the nature of love. However, this narrative is set in the context of the Anglo-Irish War/Irish War for Independence (1919-1921). While the reader is drawn into the world of tennis parties, manor houses, and beauty, the threat of attack and the constant presence of soldiers create suspicion and fear that cloud the moments of frivolity. *The Last September* is both a portrait of the end of girlhood and the end of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy.

LITERARY/HISTORICAL NOTES

Elizabeth Bowen (1899-1973) was an Anglo-Irish writer known for her novels about manor houses and the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. Though she would write well into the 1960s about subjects ranging from Ireland to London during World War II, *The Last September* is one of her earlier works. This novel shows her prowess as a writer and her subtle perspective on Ireland and its complex relationship to Britain.

The Last September was published in 1929 and set in 1920. While many novels set in this period focus on the effects of the Great War, Bowen sets hers in the heart of the Irish War for Independence/Anglo-Irish War with the wounds of World War I not yet healed.

Soldiers and “Black and Tans” (British auxiliary soldiers who were mostly veterans from WWI) were sent to Ireland as an occupying force to quell the guerrilla war led by the Irish Republican Army (IRA), who were fighting for a fully independent Ireland. This war led to the partition of Ireland into the Republic of Ireland and British controlled Northern Ireland in 1921. That partition sparked the Irish Civil War (1922-23).

Bowen’s work is often called “late modernism” in that her work is published after the writerly pyrotechnics of the early part of the century, and well after 1910, the year Virginia Woolf mused that human nature changed. However, Bowen is an inheritor of modernist sensibilities. *The Last September’s* narrative method is one that places the reader in a similar position as a character. Instead of a passive consumer of a story, the reader is forced to be an active participant in the action of the novel. Similar to James Joyce’s *Dubliners*, *The Last September* asks the reader to piece together intention through things overheard and half uttered thoughts. Meaning is created in the omissions and elisions in the narrative.

MAIN CHARACTERS

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| Sir Richard Naylor | Head of the household at Danielstown. He is protective of his family and the community. |
| Lady Myra Naylor | Wife of Sir Richard. A traditionalist who has an innate sense of the rules and the structure of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. |
| Lois Farquar | A young woman in the care of her aunt and uncle, Sir Richard and Lady Myra Naylor, since the death of her mother, Laura, who was Sir Richard’s sister. |
| Gerald Lesworth | A British army subaltern stationed in Cork and enamored with Lois. |
| Hugo Montmorency | He and his wife, Francie, are friends of the Naylor family and are at Danielstown for the summer. |
| Francie Montmorency | Lady Naylor’s contemporary, who is married to Hugo. |
| Marda Norton | A guest of the Naylor family, who breezes in and captures the attention of Lois and Mr. Montmorency. |

Laurence

Lois' cousin, who is visiting Danielstown for the summer. He is older than Lois and is indifferent to both the goings-on of Lois and her friends and the war that surrounds him.

PLOT

ANGLO-IRISH ARISTOCRACY

The Montmorencys arrive Hugo and Francie Montmorency arrive at Sir Richard and Lady Naylor's estate for the summer. Their arrival ushers in the season and offers a sense of normalcy to the Naylor's amid the patrols of British soldiers and the barracks set up nearby.

Tennis Party Lois organizes a tennis party to be held at Danielstown to mark the beginning of the season. She excitedly invites her friends, the Naylor's friends, and everyone else she can think of. This party is only partially about tennis and much more about getting everyone together. At the party Lois and her friends talk about their latest beaux and speculate on who will be the next to become engaged. Gerald displays his affection for Lois, making him a topic of conversation for all the partygoers.

Dance at the Garrison The dance thrown by Captain and Mrs. Rolfe is a highly anticipated event among the girls of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy in Cork. All the eligible soldiers from the local garrison will be there and it is the perfect opportunity to establish new relationships or cement existing ones. The dance proves to be as exciting as promised and the exuberance of the dancers even causes the gramophone to break.

MODERN WOMAN

Marda Norton arrives Situated at the midway point of the novel, Marda's entrance and subsequent exit mark a turning point in the novel. She is magnetic and attracts attention from Mr. Montmorency, Lois, and even Laurence.

SOLDIER'S LOVE

Near engagement Everyone expects that Lois and Gerald will get engaged. Lady Naylor feels this impending engagement as well and calls Gerald to talk with her. Lady Naylor steps in and convinces him that Lois doesn't love him in the way he expects, and it's a bad match. A heartbroken Gerald breaks things off with an unsuspecting Lois. He walks away without a final kiss. This will be the last time Lois sees him.

Gerald Dies News breaks that Gerald has died in an ambush while on patrol with a single shot to the head. He has been killed by rebels in retaliation for the capture of Peter Connor a few weeks before. His death is a shock to the community and brings the reality of the conflict into focus.

REBEL'S LOVE

Encounter with a Rebel Lois is out for a walk alone after the Naylor's and the Montmorencys went inside for the night. Lost in her thoughts, Lois encounters a man hiding in the bushes in a trench coat. He slips past her without saying a word. Lois tells no one that she saw the man in the dark.

Encounter at the mill While on a walk Lois and Marda come upon an abandoned mill. Marda convinces the hesitant Lois to explore the mill to give Marda the chance to escape from Hugo Montmorency's gaze. Inside, the pair stumbles across a man sleeping among the nettles. Startled awake, the man points his gun at them and assumes there are more members of their party on their way. He mockingly asks, "Is it from Castle Trent y'are?". He adds "...yez had better keep within the house while y'all have it". His presence and his words are a warning that the time for taking an idle stroll through the woods is no longer safe for the likes of Marda and Lois.

CONCLUSION

Danielstown Burns In an orchestrated strategy, the IRA burns the three estates, Danielstown, Castle Trent, and Mount Isabel, simultaneously. The burning of the houses recalls the warning from the armed man that Lois and Marda should remain in their house while they still could. Myra and Richard silently watch their home burn as if they are watching a funeral pyre. They can feel the finality of this moment. The novel's title is rooted in this moment and the Naylor's realize they have seen the last September that they will spend at Danielstown. Something utterly new will take its place.

THEMES

Danger An atmosphere of danger is deeply rooted in the text through unspoken loves and quiet conspiracies, all set against the backdrop of a war between neighbors. Elisions, secrets, and gossip operate on all levels of the novel. Within the marriage plot, Lois' friend Livvy gets engaged to David. The fact of her engagement is known to her friends but is the subject of speculation among the older set who discuss whether she is too young and if the engagement is appropriate. This seems like innocuous gossip, yet even the most banal conversation takes on a different tenor in this environment. As Myra Naylor remarks, "You know how I've always turned my face against gossip, especially these days...It's a very great danger, I think, to the life of this country".

Bowen underscores the danger of even seemingly innocuous gossip in this world with Sir Richard Naylor's concerns about Lois and her potential engagement to a British soldier. He is concerned that Gerald might have heard the rumour all the children have been repeating— that there are guns buried on the estate. Though Gerald is not allied with those who might have buried the guns, if they exist, Gerald's knowledge of the guns might bring raids to Danielstown or create rumours that the family are conspirators against England.

Secrecy and silence Bowen reinforces the risks of speaking and of knowledge by her heavy use of ellipses, dashes, unfinished sentences, and silences, which foster an air of suspicion. Bowen thus withholds objective knowledge of key events from the reader and thus engenders doubt. This secrecy culminates in Gerald's death. Gerald is shot in the head while on patrol, but the reader is not a witness to this death. Like the characters, the reader is left to piece together the events of the night through a multitude of stories and gossip. Half conversations and whispers convey the bits of information that form a picture of the event when taken together. For example, when hearing of Gerald's death, Sir Richard remembers that Gerald had been involved in the capture of a suspected rebel, Peter Connor. He recalls to himself "Peter Connor's friends, they knew everything, they were persistent, it did not do to imagine". His thoughts are not confirmed by anyone or anything. Sir Richard himself will not allow himself to imagine what might have happened or what Peter Connor's friends might have done in retaliation. The only certainty is Gerald's death.

Decay Bowen's novel is full of lives cut short and unknown futures. Decay lingers throughout the narrative. The deaths of World War I still linger in the memory of the community members and the landscape itself holds ghostly artifacts of the past. Hugo describes the spectre of a mill that he comes across with Marda and Lois: "These dead mills—the country was full of them, never quite stripped and whitened to skeleton's decency; like corpses at their most horrible. 'Another,' Hugo declared, 'of our national grievances. English law strangled to --' This abandoned mill is far from the only one that is left to rot on the landscape as a reminder of Ireland's industrial decay and financial failure.

Irish Gothic The theme of decay ties Bowen, and this novel, to the Irish gothic tradition. Like other gothic traditions, the Irish gothic draws on images of the supernatural, hauntings, and architecture reminiscent of the past. Historically, the Irish gothic tradition is associated with the anxieties of the Anglo-Irish struggling to find a position within Ireland. The abandoned mill comes into view like an apparition of a bygone era. The scene that plays out inside it between Marda, Lois, and the armed man enacts this anxiety in that the man immediately marks Marda and Lois as the Other, a class separate from him. The fact that the man escapes and Marda and Lois leave largely unscathed, troubles the traditional gothic dynamic. But then Hugo sees blood around Marda's lips, a detail that casts her as vampiric.

Dissolution Bowen's novel ends without a clear resolution for the aristocracy. Danielstown is burned down, forestalling any future for that estate. In addition, the novel ends with Lois traveling abroad, unmarried and without Gerald. Unmoored, Lois is following an undefined path into the future.

Her story is part of a broken lineage. Lois's mother, Laura, and later Gerald die in the prime of their youth. She is in danger of suffering that same fate or like Marda and Hugo, not continuing her own line with children. Marda is unmarried and Hugo has no children of his own. Francie's state of illness marks Hugo as a man whose line will end with him, impotent in his ability to make a permanent mark on his world. He is a man disjointed from time. He has the "unfortunate ability to be young at any time," and though Hugo can seem young, no matter his actual age, and therefore promising, he cannot deliver on the promise of youth or of the future. The novel's ending leaves Lois in danger of falling into this same pattern of erasure.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

LOIS Lois is trying to find her place within a complicated world. She is unsure of herself and can be flighty, but also introspective. She wrestles with the thought of marrying Gerald Lesworth, a British soldier who adores her. Part of Lois feels like she should follow the path that everyone expects her to, while another part of her reaches for an unknown future. It's not clear what that path is, but it's more than Gerald can offer.

Youthful Lois is not quite a woman and not quite a girl. This tension is evident in the novel in how she is perceived by other characters. Aunt Myra still sees her as a child and treats her as such, while Gerald sees her as a woman. While preparing for the tennis party, Aunt Myra asks Lois to gather raspberries for the guests to have with their tea and is exasperated when Lois fails to collect them. Simultaneously, Gerald is watching Lois move about the party, enamoured with her every move.

Naïve Hugo sees her naivete as a liability in the current political climate. They discuss the fact that Peter is on the run from the Black and Tans as a suspected rebel. Because the Naylor's know both Peter and Gerald, they discuss the realities of Gerald having to shoot Peter on sight or, in a bit of foreshadowing, if Peter would have to shoot Gerald. Lois cannot see the ambiguity and declares that nothing will happen to Gerald. Hugo hears her reasoning and can't decide "if she were subtle or very stupid".

Unknowable Lois' elusiveness is best illustrated through her aunt Myra's attempt to convince Gerald not to marry Lois. He tells Lady Naylor quite clearly that he loves Lois, but she insists that Lois is pleased to have Gerald's attention and his declarations of love, but "her temperament...would make a marriage quite fatal". It is unclear what she means by Lois's temperament though it echoes Hugo's description of Laura. Gerald takes her to mean that Lady Naylor does not see him as an appropriate match for Lois in class nor in social stature. That is not Myra's intention, but she does not clarify what she means to convey.

Myra may be right in that Lois does not love Gerald in the same way as Gerald loves her. However, Myra insists Lois will attend an art school rather than marry despite Lois' complete lack of artistic skill. Neither Gerald nor Myra can comprehend Lois in her totality. Nor does Lois comprehend herself. Unlike her peers, such as Livvy Thompson, who is exceptionally pleased to step into the role of the fiancée and soon to be wife, Lois yearns for a different kind of future.

Theatrical Lois is not yet sure how she wants to move through the world as a woman. Throughout the novel, she tries on different roles. In her letters to her friend Viola, a character who is only present in her letters. Lois tests out an attraction to Hugo in a letter to Viola, an attraction Viola quashes in her reply in which she warns Lois against these kinds of theatrics. "For introspection, darling, does make us the prey of the nice-middle-aged man." Viola can see Lois trying on different roles and serves as a sounding board as Lois figures out who she wants to be.

Lois herself is aware of her own performance of femininity. Her attraction to Hugo is a role she's trying on. Hugo thinks of her youth as a fault, yet Lois "could not hope to explain that her youth seemed to her also rather theatrical and that she was only young in that way because grown-up people expected it. She had never refused a role". Her role as Gerald's girlfriend is also a performance, one that is expected of her. She felt that to break from her role as Gerald's girlfriend would "be disloyal to herself, to Gerald, to an illusion both were called upon to maintain".

MARDA Marda is a smart and independent woman. However, her carefree outlook is dangerous to the existing order and hierarchy of the aristocracy. She is a glimpse of the bold new woman among the conservative lives of this Anglo-Irish community. She is a figure who offers a new kind of future that Lois cannot yet see or imagine for herself.

Independent In a world focused on marriage and finding an appropriate husband, Marda is not concerned with this pursuit. She's twenty-nine and not yet married. She loses engagement rings and may or may not marry her beau. At a previous tennis party, she lost an expensive emerald engagement ring, green for Ireland. She broke off the engagement a few weeks after she lost the ring. Despite the ring's beauty, expense, and everyone else's concern, Marda was not bothered in the least by its loss. She has no need for an engagement or a husband unlike the younger women in the novel.

To both Aunt Myra and Lois' friend Livvy, her casual response to these engagements makes her seem cold and strange. As Livvy explains, 'It seems to me odd...that she shouldn't have brought anything

off by this time. But I daresay...that there has been a disappointment'. Marda does not fit into their version of womanhood, which makes her an object of their suspicion.

Dangerous Marda is remembered by all for skinning her knee and bleeding on the boot scraper when she visited Danielstown as a child. Her close association with this story of bleeding at a children's party foreshadows the events to come. Marda is marked by blood.

On this trip to Danielstown she has lost her suitcase, which she sees as a bad omen. As Marda explains to Lois, 'I feel that suitcase won't be the end of me here. There will be a raid and I shall be shot on the avenue, not even fatally, or Laurence will take me out and upset that car.'

The danger that surrounds Marda is again evident when Marda and Lois encounter a rebel in an old, abandoned mill. During this encounter she is presumably shot in the hand. She plays off the injury as a cut from the door jamb and uses Lois' handkerchief to quickly wrap the injury. Her foresight proves true, and just being close to Marda brings Lois in direct contact with danger.

Bold Unlike Lois, Marda is confident in who she is. She is fearless, travels alone, and does not feel driven to perform her expected role. Bowen describes her as having complete possession of herself who effortlessly commands attention. "Standing vaguely she had still that quality of directedness...A hardy unawareness of self in her heightened one's own consciousness. Her lightest look watched, her casual listening assessed, her speech was a lightning attack on one's integrity out of the stronghold of her indifference". Her radiance defends against the scrutiny of others, and she feels no necessity to react or internalize that scrutiny.

GERALD Gerald is a British officer who is infatuated with Lois. Unlike Lois, he sees the world in black and white without the ability to see ambiguity. He is certain of his role in Ireland and has faith in the project of Empire. He has a deep sense of duty and personal integrity based on his perceived role as a man and as a soldier.

Dutiful As a soldier, Gerald has a duty to be on patrol and root out the opposing army, here the IRA and "rebels". He has no qualms about his mission which he sees as just and that he is doing a service to the Irish in bringing civilization and for him, civilization is British civilization. He has a certainty of his position that is thrown into question in the complexity of the Anglo-Irish War. Gerald casually mentions that he has finally captured Peter Connor who was the target of a manhunt. Gerald is taken by surprise when Laurence and the Naylor's are saddened by this news. "Gerald was horrified. His duty, so bright and abstract, had come suddenly under the shadowy claw of the personal". A mission he saw as just and right suddenly collides with the actuality that Peter was a member of the community, a man with a family who will be devastated by his capture. The abstract notions of the enemy cannot hold within the proximity of the Cork community.

Rigid Gerald's certainty about the world makes it difficult for him to see the world in any other way. He sees the correct and true pathway for his relationship with Lois. They love each other. Therefore, they will get married, and live happily as husband and wife. Yet, in his clarity, he doesn't account for the fact that Lois might not see this trajectory in the same way. They had kissed, which for him seemed like an event that put him on the path to engagement, but Lois didn't react in the way he anticipated. While he feels triumphant, she feels lonely. The difference in their perspectives is evident in the exchange they have at Danielstown.

'You know I'd die for you.' They looked at each other. The words had a solemn echo, as though among high dark arches in a church where they were standing and being married. She thought of death and glanced at his body, quick, lovely, present and yet destructible.

Gerald is clear in his intentions. He is devoted to Lois, yet Lois feels trepidation about this match. She can see the wedding and the life Gerald imagines, but also thinks of death and impermanence that foreshadows a future Gerald cannot imagine.