

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Last September (1999)

Deborah Warner

OVERVIEW

Director *The Last September* is Deborah Warner's only feature-length film. She primarily directs plays and served as the associate director of the Royal National Theatre, in London, and often collaborates with Fiona Shaw, who plays Marda Norton in this film. In 1989, Warner directed Shaw in Berthold Brecht's "The Good Person of Sichuan", and in 2002, she directed "The Powerbook" which she wrote along with Shaw and the British writer and producer Jeanette Winterson.

Film The film is adapted from Elizabeth Bowen's 1929 novel of the same name. In the film, the Anglo-Irish War has clear divisions with the British army, represented by Gerald Colthurst, and the Irish republicans, represented by Peter Connolly. The Anglo-Irish aristocracy are caught between these two sides, aligning with the Irish culturally and with the British politically. The characters in the film are explicit about their views on the war and their affiliations.

There are significant departures from the novel in plot and chronology. For example, the film heightens the complexities between Lois' suitors and affords the character of Peter a much more central role to highlight the political contrasts between him and Gerald. The film also adds a love triangle between Marda and Hugo that was not present in the novel.

Background The novel, *The Last September*, was set in 1920. While many novels set in this period focus on the effects of the Great War, Elizabeth Bowen set hers in the heart of the Irish War for Independence/Anglo-Irish War. (1919-1921). Warner's film adaptation recreates the dangers and anxieties of this era. Like the novel, the film references the "Black and Tans" (British auxiliary soldiers who were mostly veterans from WWI), who 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, in 1921, to the partition of Ireland into the Republic of Ireland and British-controlled Northern Ireland, which in turn sparked the Irish Civil War (1922-23). Warner's film amplifies the violence and captures the reality of this war.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Lois Farquar	Central figure navigating love and loyalty amid a war
Marda Norton	Independent and dynamic woman who offers Lois a new model of freedom
Gerald Colthurst	British soldier in love with Lois
Peter Connolly	Irish rebel with whom Lois is in love
Hugo Montmorency	Former fiancé of Marda and currently married to Francie
Francie Montmorency	Hugo's current wife
Sir Richard Naylor	Patriarch of the Naylor family and Lois' uncle
Lady Myra	Matriarch of the Naylor family
Laurence	Lois' cousin and Lady Myra's nephew, who is at Danielstown for his summer break from Oxford.

SYNOPSIS

The film takes place during a single summer in Ireland at Sir Richard and Lady Myra Naylor's estate at the height of the Anglo-Irish War. The Naylor family and the Anglo-Irish aristocracy find themselves at the centre of this conflict. They are losing the power they have enjoyed for centuries. This conflict is exemplified by Lois who is on the brink of adulthood and finds herself adored by Gerald, a British soldier, while in love with Peter Connolly, a rebel fighter and enemy of Gerald's army. Lois, and the aristocracy, must navigate the new reality of war and find their place within it.

SCENES

ARISTOCRACY

Anglo-Irish Aristocracy The Anglo-Irish Aristocracy has been the ruling class of Ireland for centuries. Their political allegiance is to England, but their familial allegiance is to Ireland. As the new era for Ireland begins, the members of the aristocracy are depicted as a people trapped in the mores of the past. They live lives full of tennis parties, dances, and engagements while war looms around them. The Montmorencys discuss politics and the contours of the Anglo-Irish War at dinner. There are clear divisions between Laurence, who brings his Oxford politics, and Francie, who is identified as English, and the rest of the group, who align with Ireland as a nation and a people, but not necessarily with the rebels. and have yet to decide where to go after the stay at Danielstown. The Naylor's, who are targets of the Irish rebels, express their anxieties about being shot for sitting outside at night and about the rebels who are hiding in the surrounding countryside. They are also wary of the British Army, their patrols, and their ideas about the Irish.



INDEPENDENT WOMAN

Marda, the modern woman She breezes into Danielstown and brings a sense of modernity with her. The Naylor's are immediately swept up into Marda's chaos as they learn one of her suitcases has been lost in transit, and Lois is captivated by everything about Marda. Hugo joins Marda's game of hunt. Laughing and joking with a deep sense of familiarity, they come to a clearing and run into Francie, who is dismayed when she sees their closeness.



BRITISH SOLDIERS

British patrols looking for the Irish rebels. The sound of lorries patrolling the area for rebels is a constant and a reminder that the war is never far away. Gerald, an officer in the British army, goes scouting for these rebels in the woods, where he comes across Lois and falls in love with her. Gerald courts and flirts with Lois. Aunt Myra talks to Gerald when Lois is not around. She tries to talk Gerald out of loving Lois as he can never really know her. She claims that Lois loves to be loved but will not return Gerald's love. Gerald talks to Lois and repeats Myra's claim of him not being good enough for her. He tells her that his regiment is moving to Carlow, and he can only stay if Lois is willing to marry him. "Lost. Both of us. Entirely Lost," Gerald says as he walks away.



IRISH REBELS

Peter Connolly Rumors abound that Peter, the son of family well-known to the Naylor, was involved in shooting British officers. In retaliation, the British troops threaten his family and urinate on the Connollys' door. Peter and a group of rebels find the soldiers responsible for the threats on the Connollys. Peter marches the instigator of those threats into the woods and shoots him in the head. As a result of his actions and the assault on a British sergeant, Peter is now a wanted man, hunted by the whole of the British Army stationed in Cork.

Abandoned mill Lois, Marda, and Hugo take a walk along the river. While Marda and Hugo talk about their past together, Lois walks ahead and explores an abandoned mill. Inside she comes across Peter sleeping in the nettles. She motions for him to be quiet, and he exits the mill through the back. Outside, Marda sees a person escaping but does not mention it to Hugo.



Lois aids Peter Unbeknownst to anyone, Lois brings food to Peter at the mill and questions him about his role in the attacks on British officers. As Peter is cleaning his gun, Lois asks what killing is like. He undresses Lois and kisses her but is interrupted when the pair hear Gerald outside. Gerald and another soldier, Captain Daventry, chase Peter and engage in hand-to-hand combat. Gerald tries to shoot Peter but he's out of bullets. Peter escapes.

Peter kills Gerald When Lois meets Peter at the mill, Peter says he's going to Clare to avoid the army catching him. He kisses Lois but this time he turns violent and attacks her. As they hear Gerald outside shouting for Lois, Peter accuses her of leading Gerald to him. Lois runs out of the mill and heads back through the woods. Gerald runs into the mill to find Peter, but Peter is prepared for him. He puts a gun to Gerald's head and pulls the trigger, killing Gerald instantly.



CONCLUSION

The end of Danielstown An officer tells Lois of Gerald death and Lois runs to the mill where soldiers are extracting his body. Francie tells Lois that she 'must get away from here. Go with Marda, go to London...this place is dying.' Hugo and Francie leave Danielstown. Marda is leaving as well, and Lois begs her to take her wherever she is going. Marda finally relents and promises Lois they'll have adventures together. The Naylor and Laurence send Marda and Lois off and are left alone on their estate.



THEMES

Belonging The civil war in Ireland has brought additional focus to the idea of identity. There is constant talk of who is Irish and what it means to be Irish and Anglo-Irish. Each of the central characters is divided by identity. When Francie discusses how Laurence and Lois are related, she exclaims, "Everything is so complicated over here, No wonder we poor English find it all so baffling!" Being English is not a desired quality in this community and for this accident of birth Francie is always on the outside of the group.

This exclusion is true for Gerald, as well. While he sees his Britishness as a positive characteristic, it is the reason he will never truly understand Lois and why she will never love him. He turns to Marda for help in gaining Lois' affection and Marda explains he might not understand Lois because we're Irish: "We look like you, we speak like you, well almost...but we're not...we're not you! Tribal people prefer their own...even if their own is from a different tribe...Lois for example goes about the countryside like a chieftainess...very Irish." There is an element to Lois that he will never be able to access or know because he is innately separated from her Irishness.

Violence Throughout the film, there is a constant presence of violence and the threat of danger. British patrols roll through Cork in military vehicles, and Irish rebels are around every corner. Peter and his comrades in arms are responsible for a number of attacks on British forces and are now engaged in a retaliatory campaign with the army.



Complications of Love The main plot revolves around Lois' entanglement between Gerald, the British soldier who is devoted to her, and Peter, an Irish rebel whom Lois adores but for whom the war and Irish republicanism outweigh his attachment to Lois. Her entanglement not only involves negotiating love and marriage proposals, but also nation. Gerald and Peter are on opposite sides of the Anglo-Irish War, which places Lois directly in the middle of her suitors and the war.



Curiosity The cinematography in *The Last September* underscores the film's atmosphere of suspicion with many of the pivotal scenes shot through a spyglass, through trees or through windows. The viewer is not able to hear the conversation but only watch them from afar like a voyeur.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

LOIS Lois is the central character of the film. She is a young woman trying to find her way in a turbulent and chaotic world. She is caught between two men, a British officer, who has professed his love for her, and a calculating Irish rebel. She chooses neither. As she decides her future and her role as a woman, she can be naïve but also brave in charting her own course, contrary to the wishes of those around her.

Youthful Lois is both a woman and a girl. Though she finds herself in the middle of a war, there are glimpses of Lois as childlike. She dances along the roads with Gerald and swings in the old wooden swing at Danielstown. The arc of the film is not only about the end of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, but also follows Lois' transformation from girl to woman. In the final scene, her swing is empty marking the end of Lois' childhood and the end of her time at the estate.

Brave Though Lois has her moments of youthfulness, she is also the one who protects her friends and can be counted on when she is needed. At her own peril, she is involved with Peter, who is on the run from the British

Army. When Livvy secretly tells her that their mother died and Peter wants to see her at the mill, Lois immediately leaves the dance and heads to Peter still dressed for the dance. There is no hesitation or thought of the danger she might be in.

PETER He is an old family friend of the Naylor's and brother to Lois' best friend, Livvy. Peter is an Irish Republican fighting to end the British occupation and the British officers garrisoned at Cork are his opposition. Being so close to the war and to the Cork community, he has to be elusive and secretive in his movements as he stays one step ahead of the British Army. Committed to the cause, he is very firm in his convictions.

Elusive As a guerrilla fighter, Peter is constantly on the run and escaping from capture. Wanted by the British army, he hides out in the abandoned mill. The entire community knows he's wanted, yet Lois discovers him and never reveals his location. He appears as if a ghost to torment and attack the army. Even when cornered, he manages to slip back into the countryside and disappear.

Righteous Though Peter regularly commits acts of violence towards the occupiers, he is doing what he feels is necessary as a soldier. Lois brings food and supplies for him at the mill and asks him directly about the death of the man who threatened his family. "Did you kill that sergeant?" she asks, and without hesitation he answers, "Sure did." She also asks him about the ambush at the police station. He answers with only "What do you think?" but it is clear from his smile that he was involved. His actions are not crimes or random acts of violence, but targeted attacks to protect his family and his nation.

GERALD Gerald is a British Officer stationed in Cork. He is enamoured with Lois and has traditional expectations of her as his fiancée and future wife. Together they would live an uncomplicated future. He is also certain that his duty is just, and that his actions are necessary to quell the rebellion.

Traditional Gerald's worldview is logical and conventional. He loves Lois, so in his mind it is logical that she would love him in return, and they would proceed with their relationship as expected. Following his logic, he turns up for lunch at Danielstown unannounced, which would be the natural progression of a typical romance. However, in his certitude he fails to account for Lois' own position. She is taken aback at his gesture and does not allow him to finish the words as he only manages to get out "I love..." She does not reciprocate his kiss. Neither Gerald nor Lois can comprehend how the other could have gotten the situation so entirely wrong.

Righteous In the same manner as Peter, Gerald is certain that what he's doing in Ireland is his duty and that his role is to protect the Anglo-Irish and Ireland from the Republicans who are attempting to wrest the land from the British. His uniform and his armoured patrols imbue him with the authority to put down the rebellion and go after people like Peter. When talking to Sir Richard, his allegiances become clear. "You're losing a bit of the jolly old empire. Territory, revenue, subjects. When that's gone England will still be there. We are losing a country, a world. The difference is that you don't care, but we do..." Gerald is perplexed that Sir Richard thinks of himself as part of the "we" rather than part of the British. Through the fog of his convictions, he cannot see the complexities of Sir Richard's allegiances.



MARDA Marda returns to Danielstown for a visit after having been away for several years. She brings with her new concepts of womanhood that are not present among the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. She is an aspirational figure for Lois. She is Lois' future.

Modern Marda is different from other women in her circle. She is older, unmarried, and unconcerned with the trivialities of the aristocracy. She is a new kind of woman, one who has been engaged several times, is answerable only to herself, and has lived a life of adventures. The film marks this difference not only in her mannerisms, but also in her style. She is often shown wearing loose fitting, sleek clothes that set her apart from her contemporaries in more traditional and formal clothes. Lois admires her and can see herself living Marda's life. When Marda first arrives at Danielstown, Lois tries on Marda's fur coat and pretends it's hers. Marda sees this display and says approvingly, "It suits you!" She is inspirational and offers a new vision of the future to Lois.



Conflicted Marda comes to Danielstown not only for a simple visit but to "clear up unfinished business" before she marries Leslie Laws. The unfinished business is Hugo. They once had a relationship before he married Francie. Without a clear resolution, she came to Danielstown to find out if anything remains between her and Hugo in the hopes of moving forward with Leslie. This trip allows the pair to reconnect, but ultimately, they cannot return to their past and instead go on to their separate futures. Marda to marry Leslie, and Hugo to move on from Danielstown with Francie.