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**The Anglo-Irish Identity
of Elizabeth Bowen**

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Senior Project
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“One can live in the shadow of an idea without grasping it” (*HOTD* 97). When Elizabeth Bowen was born in 1899, the Protestant Ascendancy was living in the shadow of the past. After nearly a century of prosperity in Ireland, the tables were turning on them. Their wealth and power were waning. The Catholic Irish were rebelling. The future of Ireland was in turmoil.

Motherless from the age of thirteen and forced to shuffle between various relatives during her childhood, Elizabeth Bowen struggled during these tumultuous times to come to terms with her identity. For Bowen, growing up both in England and Ireland meant being neither Irish nor English. Instead, it meant always being something in between, and it meant being conscious of her dual identity from a very young age.

It was only when Elizabeth Bowen established herself in England as an adult that she began to write about her childhood experiences in Ireland. Distance (for she was separated from Ireland by the English Channel) allowed her the freedom to analyze the social position of the Anglo-Irish as both allied with the English and emotionally tied to the Irish. Her reflections upon Anglo-Irishness and identity can be found in nearly all of her writings, but especially in *Bowen's Court*, which traces the history of her family's Big House, and *The Last September*, a fictional account of the Troubles of the 1920s in Ireland. *Bowen's Court* is unique from her other writings in that it attempts to reconstruct the Bowen family's history in relation to its physical space, Bowen's Court. These two works, examined together, help Bowen define her family's precarious position as members of a declining Big House era.

The Bowen family line can be traced back to the Welsh apOwen family who came to Ireland around the time of the English conquests in the seventeenth century (*BC* 33). During this time, a new wave of English settlers came to Ireland, and, under Cromwell, appropriated over half of the entire island (Rauchbauer 2). Concurrently, a large group of Protestants from Scotland and

Northern England emigrated to the Ulster region of Northern Ireland and largely displaced the Gaelic Irish. This event, referred to as the Ulster Plantation of 1603, resulted in a massive colonization of Northern Ireland (Rauchbauer 2). As a result, the Gaels, who were of Catholic faith, were driven away. The Williamite victory of 1690 further reinforced this pattern of Gaelic displacement to such an extent that the portion of land owned by the Catholics was reduced to one-seventh (MacAodha 43). This event marked the beginning of the Protestant Ascendancy of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland that was to continue to flourish during the eighteenth century.

The term "Anglo-Irish" can often be misleading as it does not refer to the ethnicity of its people; in fact, the Anglo-Irish came from a variety of backgrounds, including Norman, Saxon, Scottish, Gaelic, or Welsh stock (Rauchbauer 4-5). Instead, this term is synonymous with the members of the Protestant Ascendancy. It was coined to express the Irish identity to which the Protestants felt entitled; after all, they were a markedly different group of people from the English (Rauchbauer 4). In this paper, the terms Anglo-Irish and Protestant Ascendancy will be used interchangeably to refer to the same group of people.

Although members of the Protestant Ascendancy initially felt uneasy about their usurped land and wealth, they nonetheless soon began to establish themselves in Ireland by building large houses like Bowen's Court. Unlike the previous Norman Big Houses of the fourteenth century which were built more like forts, these landowners abandoned formal defense structures and focused on building large, new houses in the Georgian style (MacAodha 24). Although these houses were of modest size, they were still big, grand houses compared to the small, rural houses of nearby Irish villages.

Despite their close proximity to their Catholic neighbors, residents of these Big Houses managed to shut out the rest of Ireland and live in their own little privileged world. "Each of

these family homes, with its stable and farm and gardens deep in trees at the end of long avenues, is an island -- and, like an island, a world. Sometimes for days together a family may not happen to leave its own demesne" (BC 19). As a direct result of such isolation, the Anglo-Irish became further out of touch with their Catholic Irish neighbors than in past centuries.

Bowen's Court: The Rise and Fall of the Big House

The Bowen family was one of several Anglo-Irish families who prospered during the height of the Protestant Ascendancy. Their Big House, Bowen's Court, was erected by Henry Bowen III in 1765 in an area known as Farahy, located along the southeastern countryside of County Cork, Ireland. By building Bowen's Court, Henry Bowen III built "a house that should be certain to elevate" (BC 31). In other words, Bowen III planned his house on a much larger scale than he could afford. As a result of a lack of funds, parts of Bowen's Court were left unfinished. Nonetheless, like many other Protestant families of the time, the Bowens' viewed their house as a symbol of their power and permanent status in Ireland (Lassner 4).

Establishing themselves as rightful landowners in Ireland was not without a price. As a result of their stolen property and subsequent power, these Protestant Big Houses, as they were called, came to represent a separateness from Catholic Ireland and a dual allegiance to the English crown and to native Ireland. In addition, the geographically isolated locations of such Big Houses further created a divide between the Catholic Irish and the members of the Protestant Ascendancy.

During the eighteenth century, the Ascendancy continued to grow into a powerful force with the enactment of the Penal Laws, a series of laws that gradually confiscated land from the

Catholic Gaelic Irish and reduced them to a marginalized state in society (Rauchbauer 2). By the year 1800, a mere five percent of all land in Ireland belonged to the Catholics (MacAodha 43).

Most of the Catholics were forced to either leave Ireland or accept an inferior position by working as tenants for these Protestant Big Houses under a feudal system. Although some of the Irish chose to leave the country, most of them remained.

Prosperity among members of the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland continued until the Great Famine, which lasted from 1845-1849. This famine was caused by the failure of potato crops throughout Ireland and much of Europe. The failure of the potato crop meant hundreds of thousands of tenants could no longer pay their rents, and, consequently, landlords evicted many, if not all, of their nonpaying tenants off their land. The most well known eviction incident occurred in the village of Ballinglass, County Galway, on March 13, 1846. By force, nearly three hundred tenants were forced to give up their possessions and leave their land (Smith 71).

At Bowen's Court, the effects of the potato famine also could be strongly felt. Neighboring tenants suffered from starvation; the death toll surged. Unlike most landowning families, who mercilessly watched their tenants die, the Bowen family recognized the gravity of the situation and took charge to help the local Catholic tenants survive. Eliza Wade, the daughter of Henry Bowen V, played an active role in feeding her neighbors:

The tragedy of the Famine that entered every spirit entered and filled up Eliza Wade's. This was no time to stand pressing one's hands together. The country was dying, dying up to her door. Eliza went down to the basement and, in the big stone room at the door end of the stone passage (the room now the laundry), opened her soup kitchen. Her battle began in the half-light below-stairs. Her work was exhausting, relentless, impersonal -- no sweet-lady dispensation of charity. And it was half hopeless --

she could not feed all the people. She would, I think, gladly have made soup of herself.

As it was, some dead bodies of people too weak to get to her door were found on the grass track from the Farahy grave (*BC* 308-309).

Despite Wade's efforts and the efforts of a handful of other generous Big House owners, numerous Irish men and women did not survive. Most Protestant families were unwilling to help their Catholic tenants; they were more concerned with their own welfare. As it turns out, the death rate in Farahy (where Bowen's Court was located) during the Famine years was higher than in any other area because so many people who had been evicted from their homes died on their way to the Bowen's Court soup-kitchen (*BC* 312). Crowds of people waited outside the kitchen in Bowen's Court, and they were so desperately insistent on being fed that eventually the door had to be barred when Wade ran out of food (*BC* 312). By the time the Famine ended in 1848, several million people Irish men and women had died from disease or starvation. (Rudd 34).

Although most members of the Protestant Ascendancy survived the famine, these Big Houses were unequipped to deal with such a massive loss of workers to tend the land (Rudd 34). As a result, many landowners were forced to sell their land in order to pay off their massive debts. Many Catholic tenants were evicted from their homes and their frustration and anger grew. The growing frustration and resentment of the Catholic Irish eventually led to the Anglo-Irish War of the early twentieth century.

Resentment among the Catholic Irish continued to brew during the latter half of the nineteenth century. During this time, the Catholic Irish began to vocalize their discontent about the land that had been taken away from them by the Anglo-Irish. Tenants started forming leagues to protest the evictions (Rudd 35). Meanwhile, economic prospects for many landowners were grim; they had little money and few tenants willing to tend their land. This marked the beginning of the end

of the Protestant Ascendancy. These Big Houses continued to suffer with the introduction of a series of Land Acts which resulted in the dissolution of the feudal system (Rauchbauer 6).

Little by little these large estates were broken up among the tenantry until nothing was left except the demesne land (i.e. the house itself and its surrounding park land) (MacAodha 27). During this time, many landowners recognized the approaching end of the Ascendancy era and sold their land.

At Bowen's Court, the effects of the Land Acts could be strongly felt: "The sense of dislocation was everywhere. Property was still there, but power was going" (BC 258). Although the Bowen family managed to hang onto their estate, they realized that Anglo-Irish society "was no longer" and that "it could exist in detail -- comings and goings, entertainments, marriages -- but the main healthy abstract was gone" (BC 258-259). That healthy abstract that Elizabeth Bowen refers to was the height of the Protestant Ascendancy. Although small forms of entertainment like the tennis parties and dances still existed, the loss of power and influence could be strongly felt by the Big House owners.

The decline of the Big House era in Ireland coincided with an Irish cultural revival. A sense of nationalism grew throughout Ireland. By 1912, a Home Rule for Ireland Act was passed, allowing Ireland to be represented in Dublin. Six counties in a region called Ulster -- Antrim, Armagh, Derry, Down, Fermanagh, and Tyrone -- strongly opposed Home Rule and wished to maintain strong ties with the English crown. As Bowen describes in *Bowen's Court*, "the fatal principal of separation -- still damaging to us -- was foreshadowed. There *did* maintain this difference between North and South: in Ulster, the Protestant Ascendancy was a living fact; in Munster, Leinster and Connaught it had become, within the last fifty years, a ghost only. And the Protestant Ascendancy knew that its backbone was English rule" (430). In the end, the counties in Ulster were excluded from Home Rule, but the rest of Ireland was granted this provisional form

of independence.

However, Home Rule did not satiate the Irish for long, and soon they began to vocalize the need for an independent Irish Republic. A group of rebels known as Sinn Fein was formed, who stood for “the inalienable right of the Irish nation to sovereign independence” (Rauchbauer 10). The Easter Rebellion of 1916 marked the first major rebellion in what is known as the Anglo-Irish War. British troops captured the rebels and executed all but two of their leaders. Public outrage in Ireland over the execution of the rebel leaders led to increased nationalist fervor (Rudd 37). The Rising of 1916 was only a sign of further violence to come.

From 1916 to 1919, very little fighting took place in Ireland. World War I was still at the forefront of people’s minds. By 1919, violence broke out again in Ireland and the troubles began. In a supposed effort to protect the Protestant landowners, the British sent over Auxiliary forces known as the Black and Tans who wrecked havoc within the country, burning and pillaging many rural towns throughout the south of Ireland, including the city of Cork (Rudd 38). Bowen’s Court managed to survive the chaos of these times, although their neighbors were not as fortunate:

Between the armed Irish and the British troops in the country, reprisals and counter-reprisals -- tragic policy -- raged. Fire followed shootings, then fires fires [sic].

In the same spring night in 1921, three Anglo-Irish houses in our immediate neighborhood -- Rockmills, Ballywalter, and Convamore -- were burnt by the Irish. The British riposted by burning, still nearer Bowen’s Court, the farms of putative Sinn Feiners -- some of whom had been our family friends (BC 439).

Why did Bowen’s Court survive? No one really knows. According to Elizabeth Bowen, a protest against the burning of Bowen’s Court was raised by one of their neighbors whose own

farm had been burned by the military. It has been said that Elizabeth's father, Henry Bowen, always had treated his tenants with respect despite their religious and political differences.

Clearly, the Bowens were an exceptional family, providing food for their Catholic neighbors in a time of need and giving them the respect they deserved. Most Big House families of the time were not so generous.

Common Themes in Big House Literature

Interestingly enough, the Big House did not become a major theme in Irish literature until the Ascendancy was on the verge of disappearance (Felhmann 16). In these Big House novels, it is the physical presence of the house that receives the most emphasis. Writers like Maria Edgeworth, Charles Lever, and, of course, Elizabeth Bowen focus much of their writing efforts upon describing life within the Big House and the tensions that existed between members of the Protestant Ascendancy, the Catholic middle class, and the rural Catholic tenants (Kreilkamp 6). Maria Edgeworth was actually the first novelist who contributed substantially to the canon of Big House fiction with the introduction of *Castle Rackrent* in 1800. Although written during the height of the Protestant Ascendancy, Edgeworth writes of the decline and fall of the Rackrent family (Le Gros 61). Perhaps *Castle Rackrent* was meant the foreshadow the inevitable decline of these Big Houses. Charles Lever, on the other hand, wrote about the irresponsible landlord in *The Martins Cro' Martin* in 1856. His depiction of the breakdown of the landlord-tenant relationship reflects many of the tenancy problems that arose in Ireland after the Famine.

These novels of the Anglo-Irish literary tradition focus on a period of great economic, social, and political change in Ireland. Some Big House accounts are nostalgically written, while others

are more critical in their assessment of the inability of the Protestant Ascendancy to adapt to political and cultural change. Elizabeth Bowen writes two accounts of life in the Big House that are particularly memorable. *Bowen's Court*, which has already been discussed, chronicles the experiences of the Bowen family at their country estate, Bowen's Court. In this work, Elizabeth Bowen meticulously describes the presence of Bowen's Court and fondly praises its "picture of peace -- in the house, in the country round" (BC 457). In *The Last September*, however, Bowen casts a more critical eye on the social climate of the Big House. In this novel, Bowen sees the destruction of these Big Houses as "the inevitable result of entrenched and unchanging attitudes on the part of an unassimilated and exclusive population" (Lassner 26). Instead of attempting to integrate themselves as a part of Irish culture, the members of the Protestant Ascendancy remained isolated and failed to accept responsibility for the future of a country which was now rebelling against the Anglo-Irish's self-proclaimed aristocracy.

The Last September and other Big House novels follow some general patterns. First, they focus on the significance of a decaying house as a symbol of the declining state of the Protestant Ascendancy (Kreilkamp 21). In these novels, the physical structure of the Big House is the centripetal force which the family revolves around. The house is personified, as if it were a physical being rather than a man-made structure. More often than not, these novels depict the final days of the Ascendancy era, and the decaying house symbolizes the wane of power. In *The Last September*, Danielstown is in a state of disrepair and neglect, even its furniture is looking shabby with its "crimson chairs" fading to "a thin, light orange" (TLS 7). The "crimson chairs" suggest that this house was once beautiful, but over time its vibrancy and life has faded, and with it the power and influence of the Ascendancy has also faded.

Another commonality among Big House novels is that they generally describe a decaying

familial line, a genealogical breakdown after generations of stability and order (Kreilkamp 22). Each of these large estates has been passed down from generation to generation, but in these Big House novels there is no new generation to take over. The end of the patriarchal line, like the decaying structure of the house, symbolizes the end of Big House power and control. In *The Last September*, Lois and Laurence, although adolescents, are not direct heirs; they are the niece and nephew of the Naylor. Most likely, they will not inherit Danielstown, and the lack of a proper heir further suggests the rapidly approaching end of life at Danielstown.

Finally, Big House novels tend to culminate with an outsider taking control of the Big House. In many cases, it is the Catholic middle-class asserting control over the house after decades of being relegated to the role of tenant or subservient of the house. In *The Last September*, control of the house itself is not relinquished; instead, the house is burned as a result of the resentment and fury of its country's rebels.

The Last September

While *Bowen's Court* is a historical account of the Bowen family, *The Last September* is a fictional account based on Elizabeth Bowen's young adult experiences during the year 1920. This novel tells of the last month that Lois Farquar, a nineteen-year-old orphan, spends with her aunt and uncle, the Naylor, at Danielstown. As in *Bowen's Court*, *The Last September* is dominated by a sense of place. The physical presence of Danielstown is anthropomorphized by Bowen; the Big House takes on its own identity:

To the south, below them, the demesne trees of Danielstown made a dark formal square like a rug on the green country. In their heart like a dropped pin the grey glazed roof

reflecting the sky lightly glinted. Looking down, it seemed to Lois that they lived in a forest; space of lawns blotted out in the pressure and dusk of trees. She wondered they were not smothered; then wondered still more that they were not afraid. Far from here, too, their isolation became apparent. The house seemed to be pressing down low in apprehension, hiding its face, as though it had her vision of where it was. It seemed to huddle its trees close in fright and amazement at the wide light lovely unloving country, the unwilling bosom whereon it was set (*TLS* 92).

Danielstown, in effect, smothers its inhabitants by its "pressing down low" to the ground and by using its trees to shield the house. The inhabitants of the house are not only separated from their "unloving country" by location but also by religion and class. They are isolated from the "unwilling bosom" of Mother Ireland and yet can't seem to escape pull of the Big House.

Lois especially fears the strange pull of Danielstown for "she could not try to explain the magnetism they all exercised by their being static. Or how, after every return -- or awakening, even, from sleep or preoccupation -- she and these home surroundings still further penetrated each other mutually in the discovery of a lack (*TLS* 244). Lois feels something lacking in her life, and in the house, but she can't seem to break free from the "magnetism" of the house. She lacks the ability to assess her own needs as a young adult because they are obscured by the binding force of the house. Like the other characters in the novel, she feels as if she is merely a replica of her ancestors, forced to sacrifice any notion of individuality for the myth of Danielstown's immortality (Lassner 45).

In part, it is a strong sense of the one's predecessors that binds Lois and other characters to the physical presence of Danielstown. In *Bowen's Court*, Elizabeth Bowen describes the strong ties of each Big House with its past:

The not long past of these houses has been very intense: no Irish people -- Irish or Anglo-Irish -- live a day unconsciously. Lives in these houses, for generations, have been lived at high pitch, only muted down by the weather, in psychological closeness to one another and under the strong rule of the family myth. Lack of means, concentration of interests, love of their own sphere of power keeps most Anglo-Irish people from often going away. I know of no house in which, while the present seems to be there forever, the past is not pervadingly felt (*BC* 19).

Therefore, Elizabeth Bowen is not just a Bowen, but she is a product of a long line of Bowens who have prospered at Bowen's Court. Each generation is conscious of the one before it for "a Bowen, in the first place, made Bowen's Court. Since then, with a rather alarming succession, Bowen's Court has made the succeeding Bowens" (*BC* 23). The past generations haunt the present.

In *The Last September*, the permanence of the past is being threatened by the forcefulness of the riotous present. Day in and day out, the sounds of lorries and gunfire can be heard in the background. As Bowen describes in her preface to *The Last September*, "ambushes, arrests, captures and burnings, reprisals and counter-reprisals kept the country and country people distraught and tense. The British patrolled and hunted; the Irish planned, lay in wait, and struck" (*A* 98). Meanwhile, the Protestant Ascendancy was caught in the middle of the warfare. To England, the Anglo-Irish owed their land and power; therefore, their allegiance to Britain "pulled them one way; their own temperamental Irishness the other" (*A* 99). They did not wholeheartedly side with the rebel cause nor with the presence of British protection. Instead, their position was somewhere in the middle. In *The Last September*, the Naylor's attempt to maintain a neutral position rather than taking a stance. They amiably host young English officers at their tennis

parties, but they also fail to report to the authorities their suspicions that rebel arms are being buried on their estate. In essence, Bowen insinuates that it was their helplessness and their inability to act that led to the destruction of these estates (*A* 96).

The Naylor, like other Big House families, cannot not save their house from its inevitable destruction because they refuse to accept the gravity of their situation. They refuse to believe that they had been relegated to such a marginalized position in society after so many decades of wealth, power and prosperity. They desperately wish to believe that their generation would carry on as all the generations before them had done -- with dignity and honor. It is this desperate hope to proudly carry on the tradition of Big House life that leads the Naylor to ignore the impending danger surrounding them. In effect, the Naylor create an artificial world for themselves in which outside events are of little importance -- all that matters to them is what was happening within the walls of Danielstown. While life at Danielstown appears unstable and tumultuous to the reader, the Naylor carry on as if life couldn't be better.

It is this artificial sense of normalcy at Danielstown that Bowen critiques. Despite outside threats of violence, Sir Richard Naylor acts as if all the ruckus were merely an inconvenience to their family's established routines (*Jordan* 54). Instead of worrying about the safety of his family from rebel attacks, he claims that it is the presence of the British soldiers that is "unsettling the people" as if everything would be solved if the British soldiers were to leave Ireland alone (*TLS* 30). In an outdated and stubborn fashion, Richard Naylor and his wife continue to live life as they always have. To the reader, their actions appear foolish as they carry on with their parties in the middle of a war.

Lady Naylor is even more blind to outside events than her husband, claiming she has "made it a rule not to talk" about such happenings (*TLS* 31). She claims that "from all the talk, you might

think almost anything was going to happen" but that the Naylor's "never listen" to such foolishness (TLS 31). Clearly, the Naylor's prefer to feign ignorance over acceptance. As the novel progresses and the intensity of the violence escalates, the Naylor's continue to look towards the glory of the past rather than accept the harsh realities of the present.

The Naylor's revel in the glory of the past by carrying on with the parties and social events that have been a long-standing tradition of Big House life. Likewise, the social scene at Bowen's Court during the year 1920 was very much alive. After finishing school, Elizabeth Bowen returned to Bowen's Court from England and became absorbed in social events much like the ones described at Danielstown (Lassner 10). Parties were thrown and luncheons were held as a means of hiding from the impending storm of war. People carried on at Bowen's Court as past Bowens had done despite the sounds of warfare. Personal safety was never a great concern (Lassner 10).

Although the Naylor's remain oblivious, other characters in *The Last September* can't help but notice the precariousness of their family's situation. Laurence, Lois' cousin, remains cynical about the current state of affairs. Since he spends most of the year away at Oxford, he is able to better grasp the troubled situation in Ireland than those directly immersed in it. He can maintain a more objective perspective. The obliviousness of his aunt and uncle frustrate him, for he wishes for some "crude intrusion of the actual" (TLS 58). He later says to Hugo Montmorency that, "I should like to be here when this house burns" (TLS 58). Here, Bowen cleverly foreshadows the burning of Danielstown at the end of the novel, although Laurence is not there to watch it burn.

Laurence is not the only character in the novel who is aware of the family's troubled situation. Hugo Montmorency, a guest of the Naylor's, also realizes the Anglo-Irish's hopeless position. Perhaps one of the most insightful passages in *The Last September* occurs within the dialogue

between Hugo and Marda while they are out on a walk:

‘How far do you think this war is going to go? Will there ever be anything we can all do except not notice?’

‘Don’t ask me,’ he said, but sighed sharply as though beneath the presence of omniscience. ‘A few more hundred deaths, I suppose, on our side -- which is no side -- rather scared, rather isolated, not expressing anything except tenacity to something that isn’t there -- that never was there’ (*TLS* 117).

By making this statement, Hugo not only implies that the Anglo-Irish no longer have legitimacy, but that such legitimacy never existed (Kreilkamp 153). His grave response, which predicts several hundred more deaths before anything is resolved, suggests that the Anglo-Irish never had a right to such power in the first place. This commentary parallels Bowen’s early remarks in *Bowen’s Court* where she emphasizes that the members of the Protestant Ascendancy unfairly stole their power: "having obtained their position through an injustice, they enjoyed that position through privilege" (*BC* 455). Montmorency’s tone in this passage reflects Bowen’s own critical eye towards the establishment of the Ascendancy, an establishment that, during the 1920s, was rapidly declining.

For Lois, living within the protective walls of Danielstown with her aunt and uncle is stifling for “she wanted to go wherever the War hadn’t. She wanted to go somewhere nonchalant where politics bored them, where bands played out of doors in the hot nights and nobody wished to sleep” (*TLS* 142). Lois does not know what to do with herself, but is anxious to go and do something, for something to happen. Isolation and loneliness strike, partly because she feels detached from her family and has very few opportunities to meet new people. She feels trapped in the bubble of Danielstown.

After a particularly stifling evening at Danielstown, Lois goes out to "walk up the avenue" (BC 40). As she walks through the woods, she spots a rebel stranger. In this scene, Lois' image is shadowed by her dark dress against the black bushes:

She stood by the holly immovable, blotted out in the black, and there passed within reach of her hand, with the rise and fall of a stride, some resolute profile powerful as a thought.

In gratitude for its fleshliness she felt prompted to make some contact: not to be known of seemed like a doom of extinction (TLS 42).

As Williams argues, it is as if "the rebel claims all the light for himself and condemns Lois to his shadow" (221). This scene seems to suggest the minority status of the Protestant Ascendancy within Ireland during that time. The Naylor and other Big House families remain in the dark until the burning of their houses forces them to wake up from the reverie of the past and face the harsh glow of reality.

In part, Lois realizes the obliviousness of her aunt and uncle as she struggles to understand who she is amidst the protective veil of Danielstown: "How is it that in this country that ought to be full of such violent realness there seems nothing for me but clothes and what people say? I might as well be in some sort of cocoon" (TLS 66). Lois knows that the ongoing crisis should have a more direct impact on her life, for she "could not conceive of her country emotionally" but it doesn't (TLS 42). Interestingly enough, the rebel characters play a silent role in *The Last September* because Bowen herself did not know these people nor understand their cause. She grew up in a "cocoon" like Lois, where life revolved around the socially superficial rather than the political and social forces of the "violent realness" around them.

Growing up as a young Anglo-Irish girl, Elizabeth Bowen had many of the same concerns about her identity as Lois did. Although Bowen identified herself more with the Irish people, her

Protestant background and lack of passion for the Irish nationalist movement alienated her from ever achieving true “Irish” status. Like Lois, she could not identify with her country’s plight and that was in part what set her and the rest of the Anglo-Irish apart from the Irish. In her later years, Elizabeth Bowen wrote this about the isolation of the Anglo-Irish:

Each of these houses, with its intense, centripetal life, is isolated by something much more lasting than the physical fact of space; the isolation is innate; it is an affair of origin. It is possible that Anglo-Irish people, like only children, do not know how much they miss. Their existences, like those of only children, are singular independent and secretive (BC 20).

In this statement, Bowen makes an interesting comparison between the Anglo-Irish and only children. To be like an only child implies a naïve quality, a lack of understanding. Lois also exhibited this innocence. In many ways, the Anglo-Irish were like royalty in an ever-changing Ireland. They clung to their upper-class status, to their tradition, and struggled to hold their heads high despite being the minority. Many of them identified themselves with being Irish, but fell short because of their failure to understand the nationalist cause. Instead, the Anglo-Irish resided within Ireland but apart from the native Catholic Irish, from whom they were separated by nationality, religion, and social class.

The isolated existence of Anglo-Irish life frustrated young Elizabeth. She saw the Anglo-Irish as being child-like because they were ignorant and defenseless. Although the Anglo-Irish considered themselves Irish, they still relied on the British to protect them from the Irish rebel forces. The presence of British soldiers like Gerald in *The Last September* clearly illustrate the Anglo-Irish’s dependence upon the British for support.

It seems that this novel is closest to Elizabeth Bowen’s heart (as she remarks in the preface to

one of the earlier editions of *The Last September*) because it is in many ways a mirror reflection of her adolescence. It is a coming-of-age novel that represents the true colors of Anglo-Irishness and the progression of adolescence towards adulthood during war time. Although it only spans the time period of one month, Lois' decision to leave Danielstown seems to signify her break from the influence of the house. She is attempting, like Bowen, to establish herself as an adult in an adult world.

It is curious that Lois and Laurence are abroad when Danielstown burns. By making them absent from the scene, Bowen avoids including their reactions. A central question to ask would be does Lois feel remorse over the burning of Danielstown? Bowen half-answers this question in her preface to the novel, suggesting that since Lois, being a niece of the Naylor, would not have been a direct heir of Danielstown (A 96). Therefore, she would not have felt the same attachment to the Big House that Bowen felt towards Bowen's Court.

Although Bowen's Court managed to survive, Bowen chose to have her fictional Big House, Danielstown, go up in flames: "I *was* the child of the house from which Danielstown derives. Bowen's Court survived -- nonetheless, so often in my mind's eye did I see it burning that the terrible last event in *The Last September* is more real than anything I have lived through" (A 100). It is interesting that Bowen chose to have Danielstown end in destruction. She may have chosen to end the novel with the destruction of the house in order to further emphasize the naivety and helplessness of the Naylor, for "Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, not saying anything, did not look at each other, for in the light of the sky they saw too distinctly" (TLS 303). Although the Naylor tried to keep themselves in the dark as long as they could, the finality of their beloved house burning leaves them shaken, for they now see "too distinctly" the end of their social position and status in Ireland:

For in February, before those leaves had visibly budded, the death -- the execution, rather -- of the three houses, Danielstown, Castle Trent, Mount Isabel, occurred in the same night. A fearful scarlet ate up the hard spring darkness; indeed, it seemed that an extra day, unreckoned, had come to abortive birth that these things might happen. It seemed, looking from east to west at the sky tall with scarlet, that the country itself was burning; while to the north the neck of the mountain before Mount Isabel was frightfully outlined (*TLS* 303).

The language that Bowen uses in this final passage is particularly striking. The "abortive birth" seems to suggest that the Anglo-Irish were like unwanted children being rejected from the mother. This parallels the "unwilling bosom" of Ireland that is mentioned earlier in the novel. There is a sense of fate to this passage, as if Danielstown were always destined to burn and that it was only a matter of time before its "execution" occurred.

The Anglo-Irish Identity of Elizabeth Bowen

As Elizabeth began to establish herself as a writer, she realized the impossibility in defining her Anglo-Irish self and expressed her ambivalent feelings through her depiction of Lois. Like Lois, Bowen felt that Big House life constituted a way of living that was "abstract of several countrysides, or an oblique, frayed island moored at the north but with an air of being detached and drawn out west from the British coast" (*TLS* 42). Bowen herself spent much of her adolescence living in England, but still spent the occasional summer at Bowen's Court. As a result, she could never fully relinquish her Irishness and assimilate as part of English culture. Instead, she found herself suspended between two cultures. Her confusion over her hyphenated

identity was further clouded by her lack of adult aspirations. As a young adult, she often wondered what she "should be and when?" (A 96). Asking such questions is not unusual. Many adolescents often find themselves asking such questions, but these questions are only further complicated when a child does not feel a sense of stability in his or her life. If Bowen had been born in the early nineteenth century and had spent her entire life living in Ireland, perhaps she would have felt more secure in her Irishness. Instead, she spends her formative years motherless and shuffling between a foreign England and the familiar yet unshakable presence of Bowen's Court, which further solidified her dual identity.

Through her writing, Elizabeth seems to come to terms with her dual identity, to reconcile the Irishness in her with the English. Writing *Bowen's Court* and *The Last September* allowed Bowen to both praise and criticize the Ascendancy of which she was a product. Both works were written while she was living in England, and the distance allowed her to analyze the psychological and social forces that had molded her adolescence. To be Anglo-Irish meant to be several things at once: allied with the British, emotionally attached to the Irish, and forever caught between the two. These two works, taken together, show the impossibility of the Anglo-Irish to objectively present the history of their Big Houses (Lee 18). In the end, I think Bowen realized that she could both be proud of the Bowen legacy while still being conscious of the inherent flaws of its existence and the existence of other Big House families.

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