Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Last September*: A Postcolonial Reading*

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0. Introduction


As Danielstown is one of the houses, which in Ireland are generally called “Big Houses,” i.e., the country mansions of the Anglo-Irish Protestant ascendancy, *The Last September* has often been interpreted and evaluated as a conservative, nostalgic Big House novel. This literary genre, which treats the problems surrounding a Big House, emerged with Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and continues as a traditional genre of Irish fiction. However, some recent critical studies approach *The Last September* challengingly using contemporary literary theories such as feminism, psychoanalysis, colonialism, and new historicism.¹

Unlike conventional critical studies, in this paper, I explore postcolonial discourse in *The Last September* and clarify how Lois’ identity is established in this context. In addition, I explore how Danielstown functions on a metaphorical level, focusing on postcolonial terms such as “domination,” “ambivalence,” “exploitation,” and “appropriation.” From this postcolonial reading, I also aim to reveal the nature of Bowen’s modernity.

1. Danielstown in a Historical Context

1.1. The History of the Protestant Ascendancy’s Domination

Until the beginning of the 20th century, the Anglo-Irish Protestant gentry had reigned over Ireland, supporting a British settler colonial system. The history of their domination dates back to the 17th century. In 1649, Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), a Puritan English general and statesman, led the Parliamentary forces in an invasion of Ireland, eventually conquering it in 1652. He confiscated no less than 1100 acres of land from the “Old English” Catholic landlords, descendants of the first English settlers in Ireland, and gave the territories to the “New English,” namely, the Protestants who had recently come from
England and settled in Ireland. This new class of landowners gradually formed the Protestant Ascendancy and enjoyed the height of its power in the second half of the 18th century, whereas the dispossessed Catholic Irish fell low to poor peasants (Killeen 30–31, 36–37).

However, in the 19th century, the Potato Famine occurred from 1845 through 1848, followed by two major issues, the land issue and the movement of nationalism. In the 20th century, during the troubled years between 1916 and 1922, the conflict between the native Irish and the British intensified. In 1916, the Easter Rising occurred, and, in 1918, the left-wing Irish republican political party Sinn Féin won an overwhelming victory in the general election to the British Parliament. Eventually, on January 1919, the Irish War of Independence erupted and lasted for two and a half years (Killeen 64–65).

Just as this history of Anglo-Irish Protestant Ascendancy reveals, Danielstown, which is the hub of the organic community and the landlord’s and ruler’s country house, functions as a symbol of domination.

1.2. Ambivalence

Danielstown also symbolizes the “ambivalence” between British and Irish identities. The term “ambivalence,” which “first developed in psychoanalysis to describe a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and wanting its opposite,” is adopted into colonial discourse theory by Homi Bhabha and describes “the complex mix of attraction and repulsion that characterizes the relationship between colonizer and colonized” (Ashcroft et al. 10). For example, inspired by both tradition and the benefits they receive through British rule, the Naylors remain loyal to Britain, despite their sympathy for the native Irish, which is demonstrated by their affection toward an Irish farmer, Michael Connor, Peter Connor (his son and Irish guerilla) and Mrs. Michael Connor.

The most prominent form of ambivalence shown by the Naylors or Danielstown is the coexistence of isolation and hospitality. Bowen regards “isolation” as one of the most inherent and common characteristics of the Big Houses, including Bowen’s Court, the Bowen family mansion, and the model for Danielstown. She writes:

Each of these family homes, with its stables 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. . . . Each of these houses, with its intense, centripetal life, is isolated by something very much more lasting than
the physical fact of space: the isolation is innate; it is an affair of origin.  (*Bowen’s Court*
19–20)

Similarly, isolation becomes one of the main features of Danielstown, as well.  We see this through Lois’ eyes as she looks down on Danielstown while traveling home from Mount Isabel, the Careys’ Big House, by trap:

Looking down, it seemed to Lois they [the Naylors] 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.

Danielstown is located in a forest, or mass of trees, at the end of a long “avenue under the beeches” (283).  This landscape, which is particular to all Big Houses, is metaphorically important because it symbolizes the ascendancy’s social isolation from the local Irish community.  As Vera Kreilkamp writes, “such distances between the gentry home and the village . . . suggest both the social isolation and defensive self-sufficiency of Anglo-Irish life and the spatial barriers that the Big House had erected against Catholic Ireland by the early twentieth century” (*Anglo-Irish Novel* 8–9).

“Hospitality” is another main feature of the Big House.  In an essay titled “The Big House,” Bowen states that “they [the big houses] were planned for spacious living—for hospitality above all” (*Collected Impressions* 196) and that “[s]ymbolically (though also matter-of-factly) the doors of the big houses stand open all day” (*Collected Impressions* 199).  Danielstown is no exception.  The Naylors invite a variety of racial and social groups—the British soldiers and their wives, the Anglo-Irish gentry, and the Catholic Irish landlords—and hold tennis parties, balls, and dinners.  However, Sir Richard and Lady Naylor have a certain degree of antipathy and contempt for the British because of their lack of intelligence, decorum, and their arrogance toward the Irish.

1.3. “Not Noticing” as a Big House Behavioral Code

The Naylors affect ignorance of political and social realities to cope with their ambivalent position in Ireland.  Avoiding collisions and continuing to behave as if nothing were happening is the basic behavioral code of the Big House, serving as a kind of counter-discourse against the colonial discourse or a defensive attitude.  For example, Lady
Naylor says, “From all the talk, you might think almost everything was going to happen, but we never listen. I have made it a rule not to talk, either” (39). Marda Norton, an Anglo-Irish houseguest, also asks another guest, Hugo Montmorency, a rhetorical question: “How far do you think this war is going to go? Will there ever be anything we can all do except not notice?” (115)

Corcoran declares that this refusal to admit the reality of war and the ascendancy’s decline is a part of the Big House culture:

. . . whatever suffering the characters endure is in part a function of their leisured, servanted culture of “not noticing” the reality of their circumstances, a refusal to admit to the fact that an increasingly appalling guerrilla war is about to extirpate them forever from the land they have lived on for generations. (46)

At the same time, this art of living by “not noticing” reflects the Anglo-Irish ascendancy’s political blindness, or what Terry Eagleton calls “the political unconscious of Anglo-Irish society” (187).

Thus, even in wartime, the Naylors continue their decorous and civilized life, adhering to the Big House code. They try to avert change and intensity, no matter how torporific or anachronistic their life seems. What the Naylors hope is to inherit and maintain the tradition of the Big House and its culture. Will Lois, then, follow in Naylors’ footsteps and adopt the Big House culture, or will she break away and define herself independently of traditional behavioral codes and values? To find an answer to this question, I will explore how Lois’ female ego is formed at Danielstown.

2. Lois’ Self-Formation at Danielstown

Lois’ relation to the Naylors is analogous to that of the Catholic Irish and the Anglo-Irish Protestant ascendancy. Like the Irish dominated by Anglo-Irish landlords, Lois, too, is a colonized subject, confined within a colonial estate, Danielstown, and controlled by the Naylors’ rigid Big House code. How does she cope with her situation? By considering the differences in the worlds inside and outside of Danielstown, I will examine how Lois’ body, emotions, and desires are constrained and how she develops into a woman in the context of this restraint.
2.1. Inside Danielstown: Confined and Unformed Lois

Lois has just finished her education in England and has not yet attained a definite national identity, living in a sense between her two mother countries, Ireland and England. This is clear one day, when walking down a shrubbery path at Danielstown, she encounters a trench-coated Irish man hurrying on his way. She presumes, “It must be because of Ireland he was in such a hurry; down from the mountains, making a short cut through their [the Naylors’] demesne” (50). Strongly impressed by his intentness and highly agitated appearance, she wonders if “he might have been a murderer” (50) or has “come for the guns [which are rumored to be buried in the demesne of Danielstown]” (50). Although he passes by without noticing her, she realizes a marked difference between herself and this Irish man, who is aroused to a state of fervent nationalism: “Here was something else that she could not share. She could not conceive of her country emotionally” (50).

Lois has not yet established her sexual identity as an adult female either. This is revealed by the vague manner in which Lois is portrayed through a series of adjectives: “uncertain,” “never determined,” “unformed,” and “transitive.”

... light took the uncertain dinted cheek-line ...; in repose, her lips met doubtfully, in a never determined line... Her chin had emphasis, seemed ready for determination. He [Hugo] supposed that unformed, anxious to make an effect, she would marry early. (42, my italics).

In addition, the ellipses and lacunae in Lois’s dialogue also indicate her uncertainty. According to Corcoran, “Ellipses and lacunae characterize its [The Last September’s] dialogue, its detail, and its plotting” (39). One of these combinations of ellipses and lacunae is seen in Lois’ dialogue with Francie Montmorency. Francie returns to Danielstown after a 12 years absence and is staying there with her husband Hugo. When she says to Lois, “I expect you are having a wonderful time now you’re grown up,” Lois answers as follows:

“O, well...” said Lois. ... Having a wonderful time, she knew, meant being attractive to a number of young men. If she said, “Yes, I do,” it implied, “Yes, I am very—” and she was not certain. She was not certain, either, how much she enjoyed herself. “Well, yes, I do,” she said finally. (32)

This conversation skillfully conveys an impression that Lois is still in a period of transition
from an adolescent girl to an adult woman.

Thus, with neither a sense of belonging to Ireland nor a sense of womanhood, Lois is kept apart from Ireland’s historical and political realities. Regarding the circumstances at Danielstown, Lois impatiently complains to Gerald Lesworth, a British subaltern of the stationed troops in Clonmore.

“Do you know that while that [the war] was going on, eight miles off, I was cutting a dress out, a voile that I didn’t even need, and playing the gramophone? . . . 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 kind of cocoon.” (70)

Life “in some kind of cocoon,” as Lois terms it, is not a protected life, but rather one confined and alienated from reality. At Danielstown, she is as good as a Gothic heroine imprisoned in a castle: she does not receive any affection or consideration from the Naylors, especially Aunt Naylor. She says to Gerald, “You’d think this was the emptiest house in Ireland—we have no family life” (123). Therefore, Lois launches her quest for love with Gerald to make up for a sense of exclusion and vacancy and to find “something definite” (223).

2.2. Invasion from Outside Danielstown: Gerald and Lois

A young handsome British subaltern, Gerald becomes acquainted with Lois at a tennis party at Danielstown, falls in love with her, and proposes to her. However, Lois fails to achieve a true physical or emotional union with him, due to his dominating imperialistic and sexual exploitative attitudes towards her, as well as his lack of emotional depth.

As a blind devotee and guardian of the British imperial order, Gerald personifies British imperialist dominance. His conviction in and allegiance to an imperial order are demonstrated in his conversation with Lois’ cousin Laurence, a student at Oxford University. When Laurence asks Gerald his personal opinion about the current situation in Ireland, he replies, “Well, the situation’s rotten. But right is right.” (129, author’s italics). He has no doubts that British imperialism is just. Moreover, he declares that from a historical perspective the British are the only people who have a civilization (129–30). This reflects exactly the colonial view of history, which regards “development,” “progress,” and “a civilization” as essential (Ashcroft et al. 8).

Gerald suffers from a lack of emotional depth and intensity. He not only stifles his emotions to obey the imperial order, but also has only a small natural capacity for affection:
“In his world, affections were rare and square . . . . He had sought and was satisfied with a few . . . repositories for his emotions: his mother, country, dog, school, a friend or two, now—crowningly—Lois” (59). Despite the magnitude of his feelings for Lois, he lacks passion even when kissing her. This leads Heather Bryant Jordan to remark: “Lois and Gerald cannot forge a true union, either sexually or emotionally” (51).

Furthermore, Gerald and Lois’ prospective marriage would result in Lois’ sexual exploitation or bodily appropriation. In postcolonial discourse, “appropriation” refers to “acts of usurpation in various cultural domains” (Ashcroft et al. 15). This process of appropriation is “sometimes used to describe the strategy by which the dominant imperial power incorporates as its own the territory or culture that it surveys and invades” (Ashcroft et al. 15). In her discussion of The Last September, Backus sees the novel’s two main motifs—war and marriage/procreation—as bound through the process of appropriation, arguing “fighting and procreation represent forms of bodily appropriation” (183). She further asserts that, through this bodily appropriation of war and procreation, Danielstown upholds “the colonial system of ideological and biological reproduction” (188). Similarly, Gerald’s marriage to Lois is an act of appropriation because it helps to preserve and proliferate the British imperialistic control in Ireland by means of his bodily invasion of Lois and the ensuing reproduction of posterity.

Their marriage, however, is unacceptable to the Anglo-Irish ascendancy. Historically, the ascendancy has inherited the Big House and its culture through marriage to approved partners, that is, the Anglo-Irish gentry, or “the better-born Catholic Irish, and the English aristocracy” (Brown 107), and other ruling classes. This strategy of marriage to an approved partner has confirmed the ascendancy’s position in Ireland. Yet, Gerald cannot in any respect be approved as a partner for Lois, because as a lower middle-class English soldier from a lowly family in Surrey, he has neither fortune and a high social standing, nor influential relatives. This sort of “miscegenation,” namely, “the sexual union of different races” (Ashcroft et al.127), threatens to destroy the Naylors’ basis of existence and way of life. Therefore, Lady Naylor opposes his engagement to Lois. Although his death at the hands of an Irish guerilla eventually makes their marriage impossible, it was doomed from the onset.

Lois’ search for identity through romantic attachment to Gerald thus results in failure. In The Last September; even the private matter of Lois and Gerald’s romance is incorporated into postcolonial discourse as “a microcosm of the larger political and social conflicts developed in the book” (Jordan 49).
2.3. Outside Danielstown: Revelation of Historical and Sexual Realities

While Lois fails to attain her full growth and self-realization within the walls of Danielstown, her growth accelerates outside the house. A crucial moment in her maturation is brought about by her encounter with an IRA gunman in a ruined mill. On Sunday evening, right before Marda’s departure from Danielstown, Lois, Marda, and Hugo take a walk in the Irish countryside and come across an abandoned mill around a bend in the Darra valley. The mill, which has fallen into ruin from disuse, is one of the many dead mills of which “the country [is] full” (170). During the walk, the trio is subjected to a high degree of sexual tension because Hugo, who is staying at Danielstown with his wife Francie, is infatuated with 29-year-old Marda, who is engaged to an English man. To escape from Hugo, Marda urges Lois to explore the mill along with her. Inside, they encounter an Irish rebel “lying [asleep] face downwards, arms spread out” (172). On waking, he points a pistol at them. It goes off accidentally and the bullet grazes Marda’s hand, hurting it slightly.

This mill is a demoralized space diametrically opposed to the Big House cosmos, which is ruled by decorum and moral code. As a place full of delightful horror “representing a commingling of proscribed historical realities and sexual possibilities” (Backus 189), it reveals to Lois the nature of historical and sexual realities. On a historical level, the encounter with the Irish rebel awakens her to the harsh reality of the relations between the native Irish and the Anglo-Irish ruling class. Hearing that Marda and Lois are from Danielstown, he stares them with “uneasy dislike” (174) and threatens them with a pistol: “It is time . . . that yourselves gave up walking. If yez have nothing better to do, yez had better keep within the house . . .” (173). At this moment, for the first time in her life, Lois keenly feels the Irish’s fierce hostility toward the ruling class.

The ruinous conditions of the mill also provide Lois with an understanding of the English crown’s economic stranglehold in Ireland. In front of the derelict mill, Hugo declares, “English law strangled the—” (170). Although he doesn’t finish his sentence, he seems to allude that English law strangled the Irish mills or millers. In fact, Britain virtually destroyed the Irish industry, including the flour industry, by means of “English tariffs, custom levies, and shipping laws” (Backus 189). Thus, the ruined mill becomes a metaphor of Ireland sacrificed to English economic exploitation.

From a sexual perspective, the mill serves as a space where Lois is initiated into the secrets of sexuality. At first, its ghostly and uncanny exterior frightens her, and she is ambivalent about entering it: “In fact she wouldn’t for worlds go into it but liked going as near as she dared” (170). Her ambivalence is derived from her sexual anxiety: “It was a fear
she didn’t want to get over, a kind of deliciousness” (170). The description of Lois entering the mill, guided by Marda, is quite erotic: “Marda put an arm round her waist, and in an ecstasy at this compulsion Lois entered the mill. Fear heightened her gratification: she welcomed its inrush, letting her look climb the scabby and livid walls to the frightful stare of the sky” (171–72). In the darkness of a further room of the mill, Lois and Marda then encounter the Irish gunman, prostrate, with a pistol by his side. At this sight, the women are “ashamed” (172), confronted by the overlapping images of the pistol and the recumbent man’s own “phallic pistol” (Corcoran 52).

Through this experience, Lois becomes aware of the nature of adult sexuality. On leaving the mill, Lois confesses to Marda: “I’ve had a . . . a revelation. . . . About Mr. Montmorency . . . he’s being awful about you, isn’t he? . . . I had no idea—I was too damned innocent—” (177). This apparent initiation into “a conspiracy of adulthood and adultery” (Heath 40) helps Lois grow from an innocent virgin to an adult woman.

2.4. Lois’ Role Models

What, then, is Lois’ ideal image of an adult woman? She has two prospects for adult role models: her mother, Laura, and Marda. As a young woman, Laura had expected a proposal from Hugo; however, impatient at his irresolution, she impulsively marries an English colonel, Walter Farquar, and leaves Danielstown. In doing so, she rebels against the world of the Big House.

Marda plays a more important role in Lois’ development. As an admirer of this modern, mature woman, Lois wishes to identify herself with Marda, as we see when, without permission, she childishly tries on Marda’s fur coat, which had been left lying on a chair in the hall. However, like Laura, Marda also chooses to leave the Big House and start a conventional married life with an English stockbroker, Leslie, in Kent, England. Not only does she settle for an old-fashioned life in which she is dependent on a husband, she also gives up a Big House life rooted in the land, opting instead for a life ruled by the British capitalist economy. In this sense, Marda falls into a traditional colonial role in which women’s bodies are treated not “as sexual but as reproductive subjects, as literal ‘wombs of empire’” (Ashcroft et al. 95) to support a colonial system by means of biological reproduction. Lois imagines the carpet in Marda’s bedroom in Danielstown burning “with the house in a scarlet night” (136). This image reflects her intense, unconscious rage against Marda, who has resigned herself to a conservative gender role. Marda, thus, cannot serve as an ideal model for Lois, either.
Like Laura and Marda, does Lois rebel against the world of Big House, or does she seek to create a new relation with it, different from those created by the older generation of heiresses? We can find an answer to this question in the last scene of the novel.

3. Burning Danielstown as a Representation

Two weeks after Marda’s departure for England, Lois, too, leaves for France to study French. The next year, in February 1921, Danielstown is burnt down by the IRA, the fire turning the sky scarlet. According to the *Morning Post* of April 9, 1923, “Between 6 December 1921 and 22 March 1923[,] 192 Big Houses were burnt by incendiaries” (Brown 110). Actually, the destruction of three Big Houses neighboring Bowen’s Court in County Cork—Rockmills, Ballywalter, and Convamore—occurred in the spring of 1921, although Bowen’s Court managed to escape the flames that time. Bowen, who was on a trip in Italy, was informed of this news in a letter from her father; she imagines Bowen’s Court in flames while reading the letter beside Lake Como. This image arises in the scene at the end of *The Last September* in which Danielstown burns (Bowen’s Court 440).

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 mountain before Mount Isabel was frightfully outlined. . . . At Danielstown, half way up the avenue under the beeches, the thin iron gate twanged (missed its latch, remained swinging aghast) as the last unlit car slid out with the executioners bland from accomplished duty. The sound of the last car widened, gave itself to the open and empty country and was demolished. Then the first wave of a silence that was to be ultimate flowed back confidently to the steps. The door stood open hospitably upon a furnace.

Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, not saying anything, did not look at each other, for in the light from the sky they saw too distinctly. (282–83)

What function does the last scene serve? For Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, Danielstown in flames becomes a visual representation that forces them to face the harsh reality of their circumstances. Although they had formerly adopted an oblivious attitude to affairs outside of the Big House, “the IRA’s political execution of the Big House through fiery holocaust” (Kreilkamp, “Bowen” 14) eventually forces them to recognize the native Irish’s hostility toward them, “their isolated vulnerability” (Brown 110) in Ireland, and the end of their colonial rule. The description of the door, “[standing] open hospitably upon a furnace,”
is ironic because “hospitality” was one of the major virtues of the Big House.

By contrast, from Lois’ perspective, this scene symbolizes her emancipation from the world of the Big House and her departure in order to find “a certain place” for herself outside it. This is the fulfillment of her unspeakable wish—the disintegration of the settler colonial system—and her longing for revolutionary change. Her desire for the destruction of the Big Houses is prefigured in two burning scenes prior to the last scene: Lois’ fantasy of the burning of the carpet of Marda’s bedroom, as mentioned before, and Laurence’s similar desire to see Danielstown burn. He says, “I should like something else to happen, some crude intrusion of the actual. . . . I should like to be here when this house burns” (63). Like Lois, he considers the collapse of the ascendancy as inevitable and returns to Oxford. The Last September thus ends with Lois’s departure for France, which, as we will see, seems to imply a future directed toward cosmopolitan modernism.

4. Conclusion

I have explored how Lois’ identity is established in The Last September. First, Bowen sets the novel in postcolonial Ireland, the period of the intensification of the conflict between the British and the Irish, and creates a framework of the colonizer versus the colonized outside Danielstown. Then, employing the same framework, she depicts a conflict between the Naylors and Lois within the domestic sphere of Danielstown. Finally, Lois breaks free of the conventional constraints of the Big House and departs for France to make a fresh start in a larger world. In sum, The Last September can be read as a postcolonial revision of the classic Bildungsroman, with a focus on Lois’ maturation, or as a feminist postcolonial novel. Simultaneously, Danielstown not only serves as the center of the Big House life and culture but also metaphorically demonstrates the changes in the historical and cultural structures in Irish society caused by “the Troubles.”

Thus, my postcolonial reading of The Last September reveals that Bowen is not a conservative Big House novelist but a modernist endowed with a modern consciousness of history, offering us the true pleasure of reading her novel.

Notes
* An earlier draft of this paper was presented in Japanese as “A Reading of The Last September: Focused on Danielstown as a Representation” at a symposium entitled “Reconsider Elizabeth Bowen’s Wartime Novels/Stories” at the 32nd Annual Conference of the Virginia Woolf Society of Japan held at Kwansei Gakuin University on November
1. For instance, Margot Gayle Backus’ *The Gothic Family Romance* discusses this novel from the gender aspects of settler colonialism; Neil Corcoran’s *Elizabeth Bowen* from Bowen’s style of writing; and Maud Ellmann’s *Elizabeth Bowen* from the relationship between the Big House’s architecture and its inhabitants’ mentality. Particularly noteworthy is Jed Esty’s brilliant modernist and colonial reading, “Virgins of Empire.”

2. Bowen, *The Last September* 93. Subsequent references to this text are to *The Last September* (1929; London: Cape, 1969).

**Works Cited**


