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The Performance of Femininity in Elizabeth Bowen's The Last September

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"Whereas many works of the Revival feature strong women, such as Molly Bloom or Pegeen Mike, who stand in contrast to the male characters, The Last September exposes a hidden crisis of femininity"

Many of the best-known texts of the Irish Literary Revival deal with a crisis of masculinity. John Millington Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* is filled with men who cannot carry out their roles as protectors or simply agents in their own lives, *Ulysses*'s Leopold Bloom sees himself as 'a womanly man', and Gabriel from *The Dead* loses his wife to a ghost of heroic manhood. This wavering masculinity is also found in other modernist texts (such as T.S. Eliot's 'Prufrock') and can be interpreted as a response to social changes in the early twentieth century (Lusty 7): women during World War I had taken jobs traditionally filled by men, many workers were now sitting in offices or in a production line rather than carrying out manual labour (Halberstam 2645), and the women's rights movement was gaining traction (Lusty 7). In Ireland, this crisis was exacerbated by English colonialism, which traditionally represented the Celts as effeminate and Ireland as a feminised nation, as opposed to the masculine qualities of England (Kiberd 30). It is no wonder then that so many authors of the Irish Revival problematise masculinity. Elizabeth Bowen does so herself in *The Last September* with a cast of passive Anglo-Irish men, but her approach is unique. Whereas many works of the Revival feature strong women, such as Molly Bloom or Pegeen Mike, who stand in contrast to the male characters, *The Last September* exposes a hidden crisis of femininity. The women of *The Last September* might be less lethargic than their male counterparts, but they are just as confused and unsatisfied. In this essay I will explore how, in Bowen's novel, women are negatively affected by their husbands' crises yet are unwilling to return to traditional gender roles. This, I will argue, plunges them into a crisis of their own.

The owners of Danielstown, Lord and Lady Naylor, seem to reflect the typical pairing of a detached man with an unstable identity and an active, engaging woman. In difficult situations, Lord Naylor 'feels he ought to do something and isn't sure what' (59), and ultimately considers himself 'an old man, really, outside all this' (203). It is therefore Lady Naylor who organises the house, leads conversations, prepares social gatherings, and decides

Lois's future. At first glance, then, Lady Naylor might seem like a perfectly vigorous and healthy woman; but on closer inspection, it becomes evident that she is unsatisfied with the role she plays in society. Whereas Richard seems content with his passive lifestyle, even as it is coming under threat, Lady Naylor constantly fantasises about other possibilities. She would have liked to have a career (174) and is nostalgic for the time when she was 'a rebel' (120). Although she never formulates this clearly, there is a sense that her marriage to Richard deprived her of these possibilities: at the time when they were open to her, 'she used to walk alone' (120) and 'never thought of marriage at all' (167). At the beginning of the novel, the Naylors are both in a state of paralysis, choosing to ignore the danger around them. However, one might question whether Lady Naylor would have been in the same situation had she remained an unmarried 'rebel'. Her friend Francie Montmorency is an even clearer example of a woman limited by her husband's passivity. Despite seeming to be in ill health, almost an invalid, Francie is in fact the more active person in her marriage. She is the one who tries to keep their conversations alive ('she talked, but Hugo did not answer') (105), and she is open to new endeavours, such as moving to Canada or, later, building a bungalow on a beautiful site. It is 'the drag of [Hugo's] indecisions' (15) that paralyses them both. The other characters seem to perceive this as well, especially Lois, who considers Hugo 'Mrs Montmorency's limitation, something about Mrs Montmorency which was a pity' (28). Just as marriage robbed Lady Naylor of an active career, so too did it leave Francie with 'no house' and 'no vocation' (14). Their husbands are perfect examples of the male modernist hero, who no longer knows what ideals and patterns to apply to his contemporary reality. They are both confused and respond passively, submitting to whatever fate has in store for them, rather than risking a false move or pointless initiative. Having tied their fates to such men, Lady Naylor and Francie have also entered a deep crisis, wanting to break into action, but remaining unable to do so.

When Lois ponders Hugo Montmorency's disappointing attitude at the beginning of the book, she subtly compares it to Gerald's 'eagerness and constancy', which are 'most dependable' (33). Gerald represents traditional social norms. Unlike the Anglo-Irish characters in the story, he is not caught between two identities: his world is stable. As the text tells us, 'he believes in the British Empire', which stands not only for a monolithic national identity, but also for an old tradition, in which men's roles were clearly defined and privileged (203). Gerald's status as a soldier, an imposing and traditionally masculine occupation, solidifies his faith in authority and his active role in society, as he not only possesses agency, but even enacts violence. Lois imagines him as the obvious romantic option for herself, constantly thinking she 'must marry Gerald' and even casting him as a character in a book (152). This detail reveals that he fits all the requirements of a traditional hero. However, Lois cannot share his confidence in their respective roles, as she is all too aware of the limitations they impose and considers them 'a net; little twists of conversation knotted together' in which 'one can't move' (191). In this traditional model of gender relations, the man might have agency, but the woman still does not. Although Hugo and Gerald are drastically different as men, one passive and one impulsive, they both present similar limitations for the women they are attached to. In fact, Gerald's 'net', which prevents Lois from moving, parallels Hugo's carriage rug, which he tucks around Mrs Montmorency in chapter 4, preventing her, as Lois noticed, from being able to walk around (29).

Gerald's traditional masculinity, however, is exiled at the end of the novel. Gerald dies off the page after having been rejected by Lois, who cannot make him her 'everything' (191). None of the ineffectual men of Danielstown can take up Gerald's role as the representative of a dependable manhood. But there is one character who might do so, albeit also off the page: Leslie Lawe. Marda's fiancé, who would never deign to visit Ireland, is a

man to match her modern personality. Unlike Gerald, whose occupation is an old constant, Leslie is a stockbroker, a man highly successful by modern standards. He is, though, also English, and conjures up in Marda's mind the same stability of 'bricks and wallpaper' (129) that Gerald represented for Lois. Leslie might stand, then, for an actualisation of gender roles (and of the Empire even), which still preserves their power. Yet Marda's understanding of their engagement reveals that these modernised roles are no less oppressive than the old ones. She feels she is going to be 'moulded by [Leslie's] idea of her', 'fixed and localised' (129). Despite having lived an independent life until now, Marda also ends up paralysed by her attachment to a man. Though this seems to be a conscious choice on her part, she might, like the other women in *The Last September*, come to regret it. This is hinted at by her idea that 'Leslie's attention' will modify her previous experiences (129), perhaps overtaking even the freedom she has enjoyed in the past.

The female characters of *The Last September*, then, are trapped, rather than lethargic. The Anglo-Irish men of the story *choose* to be inactive, afraid of the fact that traditional codes of masculinity are losing relevance. On the other hand, Bowen's women are unwillingly paralysed, not by their own passivity but by their subordination to the lives and wishes of men. The crisis of femininity, Bowen seems to suggest, stems from its traditional dependence on masculinity. At the heart of femininity, as it is explored in the book, is a concern with the perception that others, especially men, may have of it. Francie is secretive and worried about how she and her husband may seem, Lady Naylor is completely absorbed by appearances (giving parties she does not want to give, hiding Lois's entanglement with Gerald, etc.), Marda is sharply aware of how others judge or desire her at each moment, and Lois has trouble differentiating people's expectations of her from her own identity. This preoccupation with the gaze of others evokes John Berger's notion that women tend to 'watch themselves being looked at' (47). And, indeed, this is explicit in several instances throughout

The Last September: for example, when Lois feels Hugo 'looking at her while she [argues]' and 'this consciousness [lends] her particular fervour' (28), or when she is walking in the gardens and pictures Gerald 'looking at her through the thinning stems' (166). The thought of these eyes (real or imaginary) set on her modifies the way she acts, always playing 'a role' (32). Thus her 'sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another' (Berger 46). A more critical and mature version of the watched self is offered by Marda, who has more life experience than Lois. Marda seems to have separated her personal view of herself from the perception of others, although she remains secretly aware of the latter. When she meets Hugo, she notices 'his look', which 'had, in regard to herself, a peculiar intensity' (80). She observes that this makes her 'real to him as a woman' (80), noting how femininity is linked to an external gaze. Nonetheless, Hugo's gaze does not drastically change Marda's behaviour. Despite being affected by the same self-consciousness as Lois, she has more control over how this consciousness influences her.

It is Marda's ability to recognise herself as 'fluid' (129) that hints at a possible escape from the surveillance femininity implies. She suggests to Lois that being a woman is a choice, a role one can take up ('we can always be women') (98). Similarly, it can be left behind with a change of attitude and environment, or as she puts it, 'climate' (99). Marda manipulates others' perceptions of her (for instance, carefully leaking information about her engagement) but keeps their perceptions separate from her essence. This is metaphorically encapsulated in her physical appearance, which 'escapes the feminine pear-shape' (79). Marda consciously understands something that many male characters of the Irish Revival subconsciously intuit: identity, and gender as a part of it, is performative. When Synge's Christy ponders his transformation into a representative of manhood or when Bloom, in *Ulysses*, becomes a woman during a fantasy of submission, the subtext is that gender is not innate but something we act out. Women, being so highly aware of how others view them, are

in a position to comprehend this performativity more fully. Marda has already done so; Lois is slowly coming to the realisation throughout *The Last September*. Answering Marda's suggestion that one need not be a woman in other climates, Lois asks 'ought I to go to London?' and imagines how 'she would like to feel real' there (99). If Lois can find her 'real' self, unencumbered by others' expectations, she might be able to gain the freedom that Marda has enjoyed until now.

However, as we have previously noted, Marda ends up marrying Leslie, which implies that she will now constantly live under his 'straight grey gaze' (129). She does not love Leslie, but she chooses his stability. It is more than economic convenience though. The conversation she holds with Lois in her room reveals that she understands Lois's need 'to be in a pattern', to not be 'so intransitive, so lonely' (98). Freedom and self-determination sound unambiguously positive, but in a world where the gaze of others 'moulds' you, they require loneliness. Lady Naylor and Francie, who are never on their own in their respective marriages, feel 'a nostalgia for solitude' (105), for walking 'alone in the mountains' (120). But such loneliness is unnatural for human beings: we need people. This is the necessity that Marda has finally yielded to and that compels Lois to think she 'must marry Gerald' as soon as she realises that no one ever comes looking for her when she leaves the main rooms of the house (98). The cure for the crisis of femininity cannot be, then, to become isolated. Indeed, when Lois thinks of taking a train to leave Danielstown, she does not picture herself alone but thinks of Marda (191). This is probably rooted in Lois's attraction to Marda (Corbett 39-40), but it also illustrates how their non-normative relationship would not require a fake performance. Her fantasy of freedom can include Marda because Lois does not play a predetermined role in relation to her. Unlike Gerald, Marda never asks Lois to be 'like a novel' (88) and no one besides the two of them perceives their connection (it is, like their experience at the mill, 'a perfect secret') (129). True companionship, then, is a necessity, but

it requires transcending the ‘roles’ which tradition imposes. None of the marriages in *The Last September* have been able to do so and non-normative relationships are outlawed, possible only in the imagination or in other climates. Therefore, Bowen’s women can only choose between performance or isolation.

The ending of the novel does not offer a clear gleam of hope. The old world represented by Danielstown, with its ‘crowd of portraits’ that ‘cancel time’ (24), burns down, and Gerald dies. Yet Marda, Lois’s main model of femininity, marries Leslie, the epitome of modern manhood. It is unclear whether Lois will have a freer future than the previous generation of women, or whether she too will be either alone or trapped. For the time being though, she moves to France with a family Lady Naylor approves of, which keeps her in a familiar condition, delaying her future. She need not choose yet whether to marry or have a career (as her aunt puts it). On the one hand, this delay preserves the possibility that Lois might eventually find a fulfilling life, free from convention. On the other hand, it prolongs the ‘detention’ that she feels stuck in (118). Despite the disruptive fall of Danielstown and the Anglo-Irish world of her childhood, Lois’s situation remains paralysed at the close of the novel.

Through its main characters, *The Last September* examines the instability of identity and gender roles, specifically in modern(ist) Ireland. It offers a unique view of how said instability affects women, revealing the performative nature of femininity and its dependence on external expectations. The female characters of the novel are either unhappily married or unhappily single. Their example presages a bleak future for Bowen’s protagonist, Lois, who represents a new generation of women. However, the novel shows that the world is changing rapidly and that Lois’s adulthood will not be like Lady Naylor’s or even Marda’s. The question remains of whether it will be fulfilling or fall into similar trappings. Bowen does not

resolve this doubt, instead opting for an open ending, which allows each reader to imagine a future not only for Lois but for society as a whole.

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