

**Far beyond the Pages, a Morose Man Brushes Hair: Hugo Montmorency,
Corrosive Masculinity, and the Irish Gothic in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last
September* (1929)**

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Abstract

*As one of Ireland's most prominent writers during the first half of the twentieth century, Elizabeth Bowen explored the lingering effects of the Irish Potato Famine and the decline of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy by incorporating elements of the literary gothic in her novel *The Last September* (1929). In this essay, I argue that in addition to two haunting settings, an apparition, and an atypical villain, the author adapts the gothic mode in depicting the danger caused by the disempowered, aimless, and intractable Hugo Montmorency. Following in the prose footprints of prior Irish writers Sheridan Le Fanu and Bram Stoker, Bowen portrays Hugo Montmorency to suggest the dark, parasitic danger of suppressed masculine aggression upon modern women's lives and the Irish family unit.*

Keywords: Irish literature; gothic; masculinity; terror

In her preface to *The Last September*'s second edition, Elizabeth Bowen calls the novel the "nearest to my heart" of her works and described its chilling final scene—the burning of Danielstown—as "more real than anything I have lived through."¹ Set in 1920, but written in 1928, *The Last September* is her only work deliberately set in the past, during the years of her own young adulthood. Bowen used her experience as an inspiration for the novel's central character, Lois, and Bowen's family's house, Bowen's Court, served as the model for Danielstown, the setting that shelters and troubles the novel's principal characters. Given her family's Anglo-Irish background, the relations between the Anglo-Irish and the English during the early 1920s presented a troubling and terrifying situation for Bowen. The uncertainty and terror enveloping the Irish countryside blossom in *The Last September* in the form of the Gothic, seeping, fog-like, into what is ostensibly a novel of manners. This use of elements from multiple literary modes coupled with Bowen's distinct writing style—characterized as peculiar, difficult, and occasionally maddening—shields *The Last September* from categorization within a canon of traditional Gothic literature.

In this essay, I explore Elizabeth Bowen's engagement with the Gothic tradition and trace the influence the Gothic bears on the behavior of the wayward Hugo Montmorency in *The Last September*. Prior critics have discussed the novel's Gothic features within the confines of genre, paying particular attention to Gothic settings (Danielstown and the old mill), an apparition (Laura), and a villain (Daventry).² They have paid much less attention to another important Gothic figure in the novel, Hugo Montmorency. Living a disordered and unfulfilling life, Hugo changes moods from assertive to nurturing to depressed repeatedly. At the root of his personal struggle is his Anglo-Irish mindset, which traps him despite his desperate attempts to break free from it. In this essay, I argue that the tortured Hugo Montmorency is a quintessential remnant of the nineteenth-century dispossessed Anglo-Irish male found in Irish literature.³ Misplaced ambition following the sale of his estate, declining funds, and an invalid wife plague Hugo. With no escape route, isolated and conflicted, Hugo imagines himself as a feminized figure because of his inability to flourish within Anglo-Irish masculine tradition. Even more frustrated by aimless drifting and an overbearing wife, Hugo reacts in aggressive, erratic ways, threatening two central female characters, Lois Farquar and Marda Norton.

Elizabeth Bowen, the Nineteenth-Century Gothic Tradition, and Sheridan Le Fanu

Critics consider Elizabeth Bowen's Modernist writing style perplexing, partially because of her complex use of language, and partially because of the way she freely borrows from a variety of disparate literary influences. Maud Ellman, one of Bowen's staunchest defenders, writes that Bowen's style "resists categorization."⁴ For Ellman, Bowen's signature moments appear in "those electric passages where style breaks free from the constraints of action and revels in its fleeting independence."⁵ In slightly more concrete terms, Susan Osborn identifies the characteristics of Bowen's "fleeting independence" as "weird and inconsistent mimeticism, the dramatizations of impasse and non- or dissolved present, and the elliptical dialogue and lacunae in plotting that both invoke and discredit a sense of meaning."⁶ If Ellman and Osborn

attempt to pinpoint part of what makes Bowen's writing Modernist, Bowen's work suggests deeper complexity when she freely borrows from older modes of literary representation. Ellman notes that Bowen gleans the use of the omniscient narrator from classic realists.⁷ Shannon Wells-Lassange argues that Bowen borrows tropes from an array of popular nineteenth-century literary modes, particularly the sensation novel, the Victorian quest romance, the detective novel, and the Gothic.⁸ In *The Last September*, Bowen uses the novel of manners as her foundation, but the Gothic tradition wields influence on the atmosphere and plot.

Bowen mined the Irish Gothic tradition in general, but her primary Gothic inspiration came from nineteenth-century Irish writer Sheridan Le Fanu. According to Jarlath Killeen, the rich Irish Gothic canon from the nineteenth century includes the following foundational texts: Charles Robert Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas* (1864) and *In a Glass Darkly* (1872), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).⁹ Of these four writers, Le Fanu, best known for his novel *Uncle Silas* (1864) and his novella *Carmilla* (1872), most clearly informs Bowen's writing style. *Carmilla* concerns Laura, a young, lonely, and naive girl threatened by the sexual advances of a female vampire. Finding herself isolated and attracted to a newcomer, Laura provides a template for the isolated Lois Farquar, whose mysterious mother, also named Laura, hovers ghost-like throughout *The Last September*. Whereas Laura's loneliness compels her to act coquettishly toward Carmilla, Lois's boredom induced by dull confinement at Danielstown encourages her flirtations toward Hugo Montmorency and Marda Norton. The similarities between Laura's and Lois's situations reveal a common interest for both Le Fanu and Bowen: a solitary country house's debilitating effect on its inhabitants.

It would be difficult to overstate Le Fanu's influence on Elizabeth Bowen throughout her career. In *Pictures and Conversations*, a late autobiographical work, Bowen names Jonah Barrington's memoirs and the novels by Sheridan Le Fanu and Maria Edgeworth as central to her origins as a writer; she describes their exertion on her growth as a process of "infiltration."¹⁰ Later, Bowen's knowledge made her a central authority on Le Fanu's work. She wrote an introduction to a 1947 edition of Le Fanu's novel *Uncle Silas*, where she praised his "genius for the unexpected—in mood as well as event."¹¹ Bowen and Le Fanu both wrote ghost stories, each adapted at least one into novel, and their work within this sometimes-maligned genre complicated their reputations as serious writers at one time or another.

For both writers, the ghost story genre offered a plain to explore moral issues, and their longer works, often described as Gothic in case of Le Fanu and Modernist in the case of Bowen, do not signal a complete break from their earlier ghost stories. Writing about Bowen's ghost stories, John Coates characterizes the "sharp division" between Bowen's ghost stories and novels as "somewhat artificial."¹² Even though her ghost stories comprise roughly one-tenth of her short fiction, their content—particularly supernatural moments—informs works such as *The Heat of the Day* and *The World of Love*.¹³ *The Last September* provides the best example. Like Le Fanu's *Uncle Silas*, which began as the short story "A Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess," Bowen's second novel bears a strong resemblance to her story "The Back-ward

Drawing Room.”¹⁴ Unfortunately, Bowen’s ghost stories fueled the argument for Bowen’s designation as a “middlebrow” writer.¹⁵ Brook Miller identifies the lingering limitation this label had upon Bowen’s reputation and posits that critics should consider Bowen’s use of “experimental practices,” such as Gothic elements, in her fiction when arguing for her importance.¹⁶

A prime example of Bowen’s “experimental practices” is her use of Le Fanu’s ominous, psychological style as a model for her tone in *The Last September*. W.J. McCormack calls this tone a “nervous literary style,” and Bowen uses it to suggest disarray or tension within seemingly normal settings.¹⁷ Hermione Lee offers the clearest description of her style when she writes that Bowen creates a “constant sense of peril ... with edgy, unaccountable, macabre, images, odd turns of phrase, sinister details.”¹⁸ Bowen’s scenes where nonhuman images creep toward the characters further corroborate her debt to Le Fanu.¹⁹ For Moynahan, this indebtedness extends from nonhuman to human, particularly when characters feel paranoid or insecure at the suspicion that others are watching or listening.²⁰ Like Le Fanu, Bowen considered the Anglo-Irish Big House interesting—particularly in the possibility, as Ellman notes, of “lonely mansions” that “vampirised [their] owners.”²¹ Bowen’s borrowing of Le Fanu’s disconcerting technique and her use of an isolated setting hearken back to nineteenth-century Irish Gothic fiction, also the basis for Bowen’s troubled character Hugo Montmorency.

A Troubled Man on the Periphery

Hugo Montmorency’s Gothic presence in *The Last September* has much to do with how the larger Anglo-Irish family helps define him as a lonesome outsider. In short, he lacks a comfortable position at Danielstown among either the older or younger generation. The older group, comprised of the Naylor, Francie Montmorency, and Marda Norton, overshadows and irritates Hugo. The Naylor cling to Anglo-Irish tradition, while Francie takes advantage of her husband’s weakness and makes him her servant. Marda Norton, though closest in age to Hugo, lives outside the cloistered confines of Ireland and plans to marry an Englishman. The youngest generation represented by Lois and Laurence offers him no solace. They experience extreme disillusionment with Danielstown, and their situation differs from Hugo’s because they are young and in transition. Lois bides her time exploring the concept of love, while Laurence embodies the role of a dandy, placating himself with food and thwacking his peers with sarcasm and wit.²² However, with the possibility of growth and nourishment outside of Ireland, these two also represent a potential post-Anglo-Irish generation, while Hugo, one generation older than they are, displays a darker possibility of what could happen to them. At the other end of spectrum, the most ardent traditionalist is Richard Naylor. As the head of an Anglo-Irish Big House, he occupies the more conservative social position that Hugo cannot fulfill. As a nineteenth-century relic, Naylor is impossible to emulate, so a trapped Hugo resigns himself to perpetual melancholy, punctuated by moments of irrational behavior. He reacts and behaves differently from both the rebellious young generation and conservative older generation because he has no feasible plan or reasonable hope. In remaining reticent and not asserting himself and in snubbing tradition, Hugo recoils from connecting with anyone. His isolation creates a sense of

entrapment, which results from the changing conception of Anglo-Irish masculinity during the tumultuous nineteenth century.

The nineteenth century in Ireland rendered the Anglo-Irish Big House lifestyle obsolete, as it brought the Acts of Union of 1800 and the Great Potato Famine of the 1840s in real life, and in fiction, the rise of the Irish Gothic novel. The Acts of Union helped initiate a sharp division between Irish landlords and the poor. K. Theodore Hoppen describes many of the Irish landlords as corrupt, “exploiters of the poor, [and] absentees.”²³ The gap between the wealthy landowners and the poor became more pronounced during The Great Potato Famine, which began 1845 and stretched through portions of Ireland through 1851, and incited a large societal change. David Lloyd notes that at least one million Irish died and another million Irish emigrated, causing a “disappearance of at least one quarter of the population.”²⁴ Not surprisingly, this catastrophe impacted the Irish literary world. In his book *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, Terry Eagleton explores the influence of nineteenth-century Irish politics, colonial relations with England, and the Great Potato Famine on the Irish literary world. While Eagleton notes that the Act of Union of 1800 encouraged many writers to emigrate to London, leading to a decline in Irish writers living in Ireland, the souring economic situation—coupled with the Potato Famine of the 1840s—led to Irish’s fiction’s marginality in terms of output when contrasted with burgeoning English writing.²⁵ However, in spite of environmental catastrophe and emigration, Ireland’s nineteenth-century Gothic writers thrived, nurturing a long tradition of authors that includes Maria Edgeworth, Charles Robert Maturin, Sheridan Le Fanu, and Bram Stoker. For Eagleton, this development comes as no surprise as the Gothic, “in which the clammy hand of the past stretches out and manipulates the present, reducing it to a hollow repetition of itself,” best represented the “true nightmare” for the Anglo-Irish landowner.²⁶ Eagleton’s analysis details the economic challenges and artistic context that informed Elizabeth Bowen in *The Last September*, which features and lampoons one Anglo-Irish landowner, Richard, and one former landowner, Hugo. The lifestyle that comes with owning Danielstown prevents Richard Naylor from understanding either Lois’s or Laurence’s perspective, leaving him stuck in an impossible past. Simultaneously, parting with an Anglo-Irish Big House does not guarantee an improved life, as exemplified by Hugo’s post-ownership struggles to find meaning.

For Bowen and for Anglo-Irish landowners in the early nineteenth century, Hugo Montmorency’s hapless position equates to the ultimate form of human terror. In a letter entitled “Why Do I Write?” Bowen describes the danger of shapelessness: “Shapelessness, lack of meaning, and being without direction is most people’s nightmare, once they begin to think.”²⁷ Bowen assumes intelligent people strive for purpose and direction, and yearn for growth instead of remaining stationary. Making forward progress accumulating knowledge or an improved status defines success. The nightmare, shapelessness, characterizes Hugo, who literally drifts from place to place with his wife and who struggles internally to make meaning of his life. Hugo remains uncertain and lacks a role model, and his exertions prove fruitless. Thus, he holds back and unhappiness devours him as he waits: “He was not due to leave the ship in which they were all rushing out into time till ten years after the others, though it was to the others that he belonged.”²⁸ A continuing shrinking supply of money and his crippling wife ensnare him,

compounding the problem of being alone. Stifled, paralyzed in doubt, and depressed, he cannot discern a feasible escape route. Though his shared background allows him to understand the Anglo-Irish, Hugo cannot continue the tradition by idealizing their lifestyle. Some scoff at or whisper about Hugo because he represents, more vividly than anyone else, what they could become: houseless and transient.

Without an Anglo-Irish Big House, but with an Anglo-Irish background and its accompanying expectations, Hugo epitomizes a threatened bird with one broken wing. He soars awkwardly and crashes, a step or two ahead of danger. Unfocused yearnings control him, and they materialize repeatedly in his either impossible or dysfunctional decisions. No role model guides Hugo; instead of progressing forward, he dawdles in uncertainty, replete with melancholy feelings and a lack of a stable identity. Toward the end of the novel, evidence of Hugo's inability to endure mental disarray appears. When Francie, his wife, complains that her closest friend at Danielstown, Myra Naylor, is becoming unbearable, Hugo replies, "My dear Francie, life is too short for all of this," as he thinks, "Though that was not the matter with life, really; life was too long."²⁹ The thought of continual transiency with Francie and instability depress him. At this point, with the couple's impending departure, Hugo prepares to move forward to another destination, conscious of the fact that soon his wife will be his only form of company.

The contrast between what Hugo says and feels indicates the extent to which he mirrors the Anglo-Irish identity crisis that Jim Hansen discusses in study of the Irish Gothic tradition. Though he does not reference Elizabeth Bowen, Hansen uncovers the work that grounds Hugo as a Gothic figure in *The Last September*. Whereas Terry Eagleton identifies the political and socio-economic reasons for the Gothic genre's flourishing in the nineteenth century, Hansen documents the effects of its success and the resulting influence on Irish modernism. Hansen argues "Unionist Gothic" Irish writers such as Maria Edgeworth and Charles Maturin rewrote the Gothic, borrowing the mode from the English tradition and using it to criticize British colonialism. With the Anglo-Irish experiencing difficult circumstances, Edgeworth and Maturin projected the characteristics of distressed English heroines onto Irish men.³⁰ In "Unionist Gothic" works, Anglo-Irish masculinity flounders, and as Anglo-Irish men imagine themselves becoming more feminine, terror seizes them. The resulting fear troubles the male protagonists, and often prompts feelings of paranoia and a rebellious urge toward violence.³¹ Isolated in Gothic settings, the Anglo-Irish male finds himself in a "Gothic double bind"—he is first the "feminine terrorized," or shaken by the thought of appearing more feminine, and then, upon overacting in defense of waning masculinity, a "masculine terrorist."³² As a result, the conflicted subject displays aberrant thinking and atypical behavior.

From the beginning of the novel, emotional isolation and social estrangement engulf Hugo. According to Hansen, the Irish Gothic male suffers from a lack of domestic affection and is "figurally and literally dispossessed by the social logic" of his society.³³ Hugo's predicament facilitates his isolation; his break from Anglo-Irish Big House ownership and the burden of his marriage crush him. When the Montmorencys first arrive near the beginning of *The Last September*, Hugo is happy to return because Danielstown represents a comforting, stable spot

from his past. So comfortable, in fact, that Hugo confesses to his wife his preference for Danielstown over his former Anglo-Irish Big House, Rockriver. Though Rockriver receives only a passing reference in the novel, its brief appearance and subsequent absence convey Hugo's break from the Anglo-Irish expectations. When Hugo sells Rockriver, a potential Anglo-Irish family vanishes, while Hugo, the instigator or perhaps the rebel, dreamily imagines a Canadian escape. However, he finds no possibility for a Canadian relocation because of his wife's poor health aside from leaving her, which he cannot do. His dependence upon Francie prevents him from going against her wishes. From the moment he enters the story, subservience to Francie defines him. His marriage is the overarching organizational structure that encloses him, preventing him from the post-Anglo-Irish potential of Lois and Laurence. Instead, he broods and behaves erratically: "But he, prey to constant self-reproach, was a born lover; conscious of cycles in him, springs and autumns of desire and disenchantment, and of the intermediate pausing seasons, bland or frigid, eaten at either margin by the past or coming shadows of change."³⁴ With only financial worries, he roams entangled with Francie from place to place, internally trapped.

Hugo's reputation as a traveler and his young appearance heighten his misery. Often, he sidesteps criticism as others misperceive his aimlessness for youthful boldness that never recedes. For example, when she hears from Lady Naylor that Hugo is returning to Danielstown, Mrs. Pat Gegan exclaims, "It is the way the young ones do be a bit wild."³⁵ Others, equally as happy to see him, comment upon Hugo's disposition. When traveling with Lois, the pair stops at Michael Connor's farm. Lois asks Connor if he remembers Hugo, to which he replies, "Sure indeed I do! ... You are looking grand, sir, fine and stout; I know you all these years and I declare I never seen you looking stouter."³⁶ Connor's haggard appearance, by contrast, shakes Hugo. As they are going home, he informs Lois: "That is not the Michael Connor I remember. He was a foxy man with a chin."³⁷ Older Danielstown people show signs of aging that bypass Hugo, an important detail that Bowen uses to emphasize that Hugo's physical stasis. A parallel situation occurs later when Hugo walks with Marda. They stumble upon the home of Danny Regan, a man who once hunted with Hugo. Nearly blind, with a "white beard, helpless and eager," Regan greets them, ecstatic at seeing Hugo.³⁸ Regan compliments Hugo as a "lovely gentleman, as fine and upstanding as ever."³⁹ Connor's and Regan's declining appearances suggest the passing figures of Irish country life, but also Hugo's everlasting period of youth. From their perspective, Hugo represents the limitless possibility of Anglo-Irish manhood. The irony arrests Hugo—repeatedly, his former Danielstown peers compliment his youthfulness while he suffers from internal disarray. These minor characters reaffirm Hugo's stagnation, while—with their declining appearances—they also suggest the only realistic solution for his misery, death.

Attempts at Escape

Hugo acts as Francie's caretaker, a crutch she wants more than needs. The ways that Mrs. Gegan, Mr. Connor, and Mr. Regan perceive Hugo—young, wild, and restless—contrast with his behavior in Francie's presence. Around her, Hugo's ambition withers, and he transforms, becoming "old-maidish."⁴⁰ From their initial appearance in the novel, she controls

him: “They might well say she had taken the brilliant young man he’d once been and taught him to watch her, to nurse her, and to shake out her dresses.”⁴¹ In his presence, Francie coordinates his attention, demanding Hugo’s dotting response and full affection. Hugo’s behavior toward Francie causes others to view her differently. Marda wonders at one point, “Isn’t she his mother—practically?”⁴² If Francie’s demands of Hugo characterize her motherliness at times, she also succumbs to fits of despair that require his attention. At one point, he fiercely works to wrap his wife’s knees;⁴³ during another, he prescribes Francie something to help her sleep.⁴⁴ In the most symbolic sequence, Lois accidentally stumbles upon Hugo brushing his wife’s hair in front the mirror. Francie observes Lois “standing still in alarm.”⁴⁵ Their eyes meet and they exchange smiles while Hugo, lost in his labor, fails to observe the exchange. Lois’s hidden shock, Francie’s indulgent response, and Hugo’s complete obliviousness to their interaction capture Hugo at his most resigned moment as a personal attendant.

Away from Francie, Hugo tries and fails to impress Laurence, a young man belonging to the succeeding Anglo-Irish generation, with his dated conception of masculinity. Unlike Francie, who visits for the first time in twelve years, Hugo makes regular visits to Danielstown. Part of his reason for his repeated trips is its appeal as an escape, a place that occasionally reminds him of the comfort of past times. Thus, when Laurence mentions the possible destruction of Danielstown, it offends Hugo. Laurence, alienated by the house’s remoteness and its grotesque parade of visitors, whines about his frustration to the point when Hugo tells him, “Why are you here at all if you don’t like it—as Hercules said? I was happy here at your age, I was full of the place. I asked nothing better.”⁴⁶ When Laurence, ignoring Hugo’s opinion, replies that he would love to be present when Danielstown burns, Hugo responds, “Quite impossible; quite unthinkable. Why don’t you fish or something?”⁴⁷ Fond memories of Hugo’s youth at Danielstown—a place to refresh or fish rather than complain or criticize—comfort him; when the young Laurence cannot imagine, much less reciprocate, those feelings, Hugo feels “more than ever his isolation, his homelessness.”⁴⁸ Outdoor sports such as hunting, fishing, or tennis, refuges of masculinity for Hugo, serve no purpose for the next male generation. Laurence regrets his inability to be elsewhere, and as he scoffs at Hugo’s prescription for melancholia, Hugo’s terror of isolation grows in response to the generational divide. His fallback is Francie. Francie’s needs define him as caretaker, a tangible role, as the young Laurence pointedly finds his ideas of about outdoor sports ridiculous.

Finding neither friendship with Laurence, nor the possibility of becoming his mentor, Hugo attempts to experience Danielstown as a place of internal renewal. As he peers back into the past to avoid reality, Hugo cannot find solace because memories of his youthful athletic ability and his pre-Francie freedom smother his chance to experience renewal or growth. This failure emphasizes another discrepancy between the two male generations: the way they respond to disillusionment. From Laurence’s perspective, Hugo cannot voice what troubles him—Hugo’s “refuge was manly talk.”⁴⁹ Hugo’s viewpoint about the appropriate response to internal struggles sharply differs: “Life was to him an affair of discomfort, but that discomfort should be made articulate seemed to him shocking.”⁵⁰ Laurence voices his rebellious feelings whenever he likes, while tradition, respect, and fond memories of Danielstown quiet Hugo. What separates the two

is what scholar Joanna Tapp Pierce identifies as Hugo's deep connection to Danielstown.⁵¹ Describing Hugo's feelings for Danielstown, Tapp explains, "[they] do not enrich his life or broaden his perspective. ... Rather, they contract it, illustrating how feelings of place, when tied to feelings of possessiveness or covetousness, can be destructive."⁵² Here, Tapp identifies Hugo's complex desire regarding Danielstown as a comfortable place. The house and his experiences there were pleasant for him in the past, but now, surrounded by Francie and no one to relate to, the only peace that Danielstown offers Hugo is its rural environs where he can walk away and escape. Though the desperation that he exhibits during these sojourns is often completely irrational and counterproductive, Hugo attempts, and fails, to find a present purpose mining the fond memories of his past. Acting "manly" leaves him feeling completely isolated because of the decline in value of Danielstown as a distinct place for the next male generation. Hugo rejects Laurence's pessimism, but he cannot successfully combat it. Refusing to see Danielstown as a place of imprisonment, Hugo retreats outdoors.

Going outside and away from the decaying house alone is Hugo's last refuge. Without completely embracing Anglo-Irish tradition and without his own Anglo-Irish Big House, Hugo cannot relate to Richard Naylor, and lacking the freedom of being single and the feeling of separation from Anglo-Irish tradition, cannot interact with the cynical Laurence. Men important to his past, minor characters such as Michael Connor and Danny Regan, hastily decline and mark the coming of death. Yet, Danielstown's landscape remains the closest thing to consistency for Hugo, though the skirmishes between the Irish rebels and the English soldiers threaten its stability. In one instance, Hugo's anger about rural Ireland as a playground for war appears. While riding with Lois, he proclaims, "And so much bitterness over this empty country!"⁵³ Here Hugo expresses more passion than any one moment with Francie. Another significant moment occurs when Hugo escapes to outside of the house to walk in the rain. Moments after he steps out, Francie, then Myra, and finally Richard all hasten to chase after him to make sure he has an umbrella. Frustrated, Hugo "pretended not to hear and walked on with a back view of positive hatred."⁵⁴ This scene captures Hugo's mounting frustration with the house's claustrophobic environment, both the house as a structure and the whispers and secretive discussions it shelters and facilitates. His attempt at an outdoor walk is his method of escape. Though no longer a landowner, Hugo appreciates the rural Anglo-Irish countryside for the past memories it evokes that are unknown to the outsiders, the English soldiers and the Irish rebels.

The most important place for Hugo is Darra Valley, an isolated area where Hugo attempts to think about his life and fails because of human conflict. Once a setting where he experienced a tempestuous fight with Laura (Lois's mother and Hugo's former love) many years before, Darra Valley again serves as a backdrop for violence in the present. By the time Hugo walks with Marda and Lois to Darra Valley, he no longer recalls his fight with Laura. Here readers recognize something that Hugo cannot: the irony that the arguably most soothing place in Danielstown's vicinity offers Hugo little but disruption and terror. Marda, Lois, and Hugo stumble upon the old abandoned mill, a symbol that harkens back to nineteenth-century Ireland before the twentieth-century English occupation. While Marda and Lois explore the dark recesses of the mill, Hugo smokes by the stream and considers both his troubled relationship

with Francie and his growing infatuation with Marda. In his most emotionally honest moment in the novel, Hugo wonders, “It is like this ... what I need is—?”⁵⁵ Suddenly, a gunshot shatters his thought, and he abruptly assumes and then displays the role of a masculine protector. The injured Marda exits the mill with Lois and assures Hugo of their safety. Hugo remains unconvinced and then becomes angry because Marda, like the gunshot to his prior reflective thought, denies him the possibility of assuming a comfortable role. Hugo “violently” says, “Let me go past,” twice, attempting to display his sense of masculinity.⁵⁶ Marda and Lois command him to stop, which leads to Hugo exploding: “You deserve to be shot!”⁵⁷ Socially silenced, as Marda and Lois effectively delete him from the main action in the most violent encounter in the novel, Hugo’s only response is to explode uncontrollably and selfishly. Later, his “irresistible angle” resurfaces when Hugo returns alone to Darra Valley again, after Marda’s departure.⁵⁸ Marda’s account of the smooth recovery of her injury magnifies Hugo’s wrath because, again, “it had pleased both the girls to underline his exclusion.”⁵⁹

A Masculine Nuisance

Hugo external attempts to assert his masculinity result in his poor relationships with the women in the novel. Hugo’s sense of masculinity is the one thing he imagines that he owns; the fear of losing it frightens him. As result, Hugo’s behavior becomes troubling when he senses his masculinity beginning to recede. John Foster notes that one distinguishing trait of Bowen’s depiction of the Anglo-Irish is their marked “obsession with the right behavior.”⁶⁰ Hugo’s sensitivity to Anglo-Irish expectations while in the company of Anglo-Irish people overwhelms him. When the fearful Hugo suspects a challenge to his masculinity, he overreacts in an aggressive manner, embodying the “Gothic double bind.” The actions resulting from Hugo’s “masculine anxiety” sever his connections with multiple women in *The Last September*.⁶¹ The harder that Hugo tries to follow masculine behavior patterns approved by prior generations, the more treacherous he crashes. With Francie, he maintains a semi-functional, dependent relationship primarily because he adheres to her commands or commiserates with her frustration. At Danielstown, his former relationship with Laura, and her inexplicable presence, still thrives in the minds of others. Furthermore, when he tries to act masculine in the presence of Lois and Marda, he fails as they each perceive his behavior as aberrant.

Hugo’s treatment of Laura remains one of *The Last September*’s pressing mysteries. Narrative references to Laura’s rages, obscene drawings, and forgotten suicidal wishes point to her strong resistance to a potentially oppressive life with Hugo. Though she does not appear alive in *The Last September*, the lingering aftereffects of her presence do two things. It elevates the sense of shadowy darkness that enshrouds Danielstown and informs Hugo’s relationships with other women in the novel. The stormy relationship between Hugo and Laura ended sourly. Hugo’s recollection of Laura remains vague, though Laurence knows more of their story. After leaving Hugo and Danielstown, Laura married Mr. Farquar, the “rudest man in Ulster ... with a disagreeably fresh complexion and an eye like a horse.”⁶² More importantly, though, she abandoned the Anglo-Irish lifestyle enraged, particularly by Hugo and Richard; then married and died, “without giving anyone notice of her intention.”⁶³ Laura’s passion contrasts with the

inertness of Hugo's wife, Francie, and Laura's relics remain at Danielstown. Trunks full of her rotting clothes fester in the attics.⁶⁴ She leaves behind a suicidal wish for herself and Hugo at Darra Valley⁶⁵ and "an insulting drawing of somebody, probably Hugo," which Lois finds.⁶⁶ In one scene, when Mrs. Carey accuses Hugo of "avoiding things," she also levels a more particular indictment: "Look how he didn't marry Laura."⁶⁷ Immediately, though, she regrets the statement, characterizing it as "ridiculous," and possibly exaggerated.⁶⁸ However, Laura's anger toward Hugo and Richard, coupled with her abrupt exit and death, suggests her urgent denial of the Anglo-Irish lifestyle. Hugo's direct influence upon Laura's life and death remains unclear, but his interactions with Lois and Marda make his mysterious past with Laura seem all the more treacherous.

For Lois, Hugo provides an "agreeable matter for introspection," a constant presence because their close proximity. Moreover, he appears complicated in a way that the young soldiers that she meets are not.⁶⁹ When the Montmorencys first arrive, she realizes that Hugo would not attempt to understand her.⁷⁰ This appearance of rejection, in turn, makes Lois more curious about him and him more dangerous to her. She is already nervous about Hugo because of his long ago relationship with her mother and because of her recent interest in men. At the first family dinner with the Montmorencys, Lois reflects that her vision of Hugo from childhood contrasts Hugo's present look: "intelligent, dulled, [and with] a sub-acid smile."⁷¹ Moments later, she becomes self-conscious during a heated discussion about guns with Richard Naylor not because of the issue so much as what she perceives as Hugo's penetrating glance aimed directly at her. Her urge to argue and draw attention to herself swiftly increases as she becomes more self-conscious. Finally, when she looks back toward Hugo, he glances elsewhere with what she imagines as the "most scornful repudiation."⁷² Her perception of Hugo's judgment troubles Lois, but it is false. The narrator informs readers that Hugo's prior gaze, rather than glance, analyzed Lois and predicted her early marriage. Lois understands this false look of disapproval as threatening, and yet he becomes alluring for Lois, temporarily complicating her vague feelings about Gerald.

Because of his melancholy temperament and erratic decisions, Hugo exists throughout the novel as an emotional threat to Lois. With his wild mood swings, Hugo sometimes behaves like the young Lois. Lois presses him for information about her mother's thoughts about being young and in love, to which he responds, "I don't suppose she had made up her mind," a statement in direct conflict with Mrs. Carey's later jab at Hugo's lack of commitment.⁷³ Hugo's insight here, a rare reference to Laura, suggests a similarity between mother and daughter, as if Laura's ghost lives through Lois. This scene captures the awkwardness of Lois and Hugo's relationship, which appears most vividly during their journey throughout the county together. Lois is uncertain about love and how to respond to her suitors, which Hugo suspects. When Hugo mentions a hypothetical marriage with Laura, Lois simultaneously compliments and makes a pass at him by acknowledging his potential to be a better father than her own father.⁷⁴ This repels Hugo, and he changes the subject. In bringing Laura into the conversation, Lois activates Hugo's desire to exit. Lois, though, remains infatuated with Hugo until her friend Viola's blunter reprimand: "Don't talk of yourself with that elderly man."⁷⁵ This nixes her romantic

interest in Hugo, but as a deviant from the Anglo-Irish, Hugo also represents a dark warning for Lois about the need to escape Ireland and Anglo-Irish lifestyle. His indecisiveness, and the associated consequences, can easily become her own. With the help of Viola's criticism and her observations, Lois awakens to the potential danger before it is too late. Describing Lois's departure before the burning of Danielstown, Derek Hand notes that Lois has no guarantee for life improvement. Leaving Ireland "might also signal a future of dislocation from home and family, with her condemned to be a homeless wanderer rather than be[ing] in a single place."⁷⁶ For Lois, Hugo's inability to find conviction, certainty, and clarity amidst "conscious cycles ... springs and autumns of desire and disenchantment" poses a threat.⁷⁷

If Hugo briefly tempts Lois romantically and serves as a poor role model, he more aggressively inconveniences Marda Norton. Older and more confident than Lois, Marda Norton swoops into Danielstown, saddled with the baggage of prior bad experiences and knowledge of her impending marriage to an Englishman. Her approaching marriage compounds her already inferior status and whimsical behavior. Hugo finds her immediately alluring: "His look, coming wavering round his interruption, had, in regard to herself, a peculiar intensity. She was real to him as a woman."⁷⁸ This infatuation never dissolves. Hugo preys upon Marda during walks, finding her a welcome diversion from his wife. Eventually, Marda manages to repel Hugo, leaving him emotionally wrecked once again. The most pivotal scene detailing the risk that Hugo presents for Marda occurs during her conversation with Myra Naylor after getting shot at the mill at Darra Valley. Marda says, "We must be thankful that nothing worse has happened this time," while both she and Myra think immediately about Hugo, both sure that the other is not thinking about him.⁷⁹ Both women privately know the danger accompanying Hugo's plight as a married suitor, and each remains quiet because of Anglo-Irish tradition. At Danielstown, Hugo's awkward advances present Marda primary test. Even after she leaves, he wants to communicate again via a letter from his wife.⁸⁰ Hugo's spirit declines once he realizes there is no hope in maintaining the connection and that an affair with Marda is impossible.

In borrowing from the Gothic mode, Elizabeth Bowen asks readers to consider the effects of the English occupation on the Irish people and to uncomfortably experience the final stages of Anglo-Irish decline. Bowen understood that the archaic lifestyle at Danielstown had to end, paving the way for an evolution in Irish culture. In her use of a setting that harkens back to Ireland's nineteenth-century past and allusions to otherworldly imagery such as ghosts, shadows, and Satan, Bowen insists on change by linking the past with regression or decay. She is hopeful for a future generation, despite the ambiguity surrounding fates of the young characters, Lois and Laurence. Their youthfulness suggests potential, though it could easily, if mismanaged, develop into something horrific like Hugo Montmorency. Drawing from prior Irish Gothic writers, Bowen reimagines the brooding Hugo as a remnant of the nineteenth-century Irish Gothic. He is too old and too young; too feminine and too masculine; too cynical and too romantic; too tied to past experiences and too flighty; too perceptive and too oblivious; too in favor of travel and too captivated by the idea of place. A lost man, Hugo lingers beyond the novel, and serves as a reminder of the potential danger of locking oneself in the past amidst abrupt historical and generational change.

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References

- ¹ Elizabeth Bowen, "Preface to *The Last September* (2nd edition)" in *The Mulberry Tree. Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*. ed. Hermione Lee (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 123; 126.
- ² Neil Corcoran. *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (New York, Oxford U P, 2004), 51-60.
- ³ For additional examples, see Annibal Montorio in Charles Robert Maturin's *The Fatal Revenge* (1807) or Jonathan Harker in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). For extensive commentary, see Jim Hansen's *Terror and Irish Modernism: The Gothic Tradition from Burke to Beckett* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York P, 2009). Of these types of characters, Hansen notes, "In the end, in fact, many of the male characters in the Irish Gothic novel find themselves cut off not only from the public sphere, but also from history itself" (22).
- ⁴ Maud Ellman. *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadows across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U P, 2003), 19.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.
- ⁶ Susan Osborn. "Introduction." *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*. ed. Susan Osborn (Cork, Ireland: Cork U P, 2009), 5.
- ⁷ Ellman, 20.
- ⁸ Shannon Wells-Lassange. "'She-ward Bound': Elizabeth Bowen as a Sensationalist Writer." *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*. ed. Susan Osborn (Cork, Ireland: Cork U P, 2009), 97.
- ⁹ Jarlath Killeen. *Gothic Ireland: Horror and the Irish Anglican Imagination in the Long Eighteenth Century*. (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 2005), 25.
- ¹⁰ Elizabeth Bowen. *Pictures and Conversations*. (New York: Knopf, 1975), 62. Here, Bowen projects a form of herself as a young artist. She also suggests the importance other writers: "Origins. My own: Anglo-Ireland and its peculiarities. The infiltration—I believe?—of at least some of these peculiarities into my books. This documented by Jonah Barrington's memoirs, Le Fanu and Edgeworth novels, and others" (62). The identification of the first three suggests a more immediate debt. For a concise list of the other artistic influences drawn from Bowen's other work, see Hermione Lee. *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation*. (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1981), 19.
- ¹¹ Elizabeth Bowen. "Introduction." *Uncle Silas*. by Sheridan Le Fanu (London: Cresset Press, 1947), 10.
- ¹² John Coates. "The Moral Argument of Elizabeth Bowen's Ghost Stories." *Renascence* 52.4 (Summer 2000), 294.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 294-295.
- ¹⁴ Victor Sage. "Introduction." *Uncle Silas*. by Sheridan Le Fanu. (East Rutherford, NJ: Penguin 2001), x.
- ¹⁵ Brook Miller. "The Impersonal Personal: Value, Voice, and Agency in Elizabeth Bowen's Literary and Social Criticism." *Modern Fiction Studies* 53.2 (Summer 2007), 352.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 353; 355.

¹⁷ W.J. McCormack. *Dissolute Characters: Irish Literary History through Balzac, Sheridan Le Fanu, Yeats, and Bowen* (New York: Manchester U P, 1993), viii.

¹⁸ Lee, 48.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

²⁰ Julian Moynahan. *Anglo-Irish: The Literary Imagination in a Hyphenated Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U P, 2005), 242.

²¹ Ellman, 51.

²² Declan Kiberd, Declan. "Elizabeth Bowen: The Dandy in Revolt." *Sex, Nation, and Dissent in Irish Writing*. ed. Eibhear Walshe (Cork, Ireland: Cork U P, 1997),145.

²³ K. Theodore Hoppen. "An Incorporating Union? British Politicians and Ireland 1800-1830." *English Historical Review* CXXIII.501 (April 2008), 346.

²⁴ David Lloyd. "The Political Economy of the Potato." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 29.2-3 (June/September 2007), 311.

²⁵ Terry Eagleton. *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (New York: Verso, 1995), 145-6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

²⁷ Elizabeth Bowen. "Why Do I Write?" *The Mulberry Tree. Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*. ed. Hermione Lee. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 224.

²⁸ Elizabeth Bowen. *The Last September* (New York: Anchor, 2000), 36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 271.

³⁰ Hansen, 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

³² *Ibid.*, 12.

³³ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 86.

⁴¹ Ibid., 20.

⁴² Ibid., 110.

⁴³ Ibid., 35.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 151.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁵¹ Joanna Tapp Pierce. “‘Nothing Can Happen Nowhere’: Elizabeth Bowen’s Figures in Landscape.” *Out of the Earth: Ecocritical Readings of Irish Texts*. ed. Christine Cusick (Cork, Ireland: Cork U P, 2010), 61.

⁵² Ibid., 61.

⁵³ Bowen, *The Last September*, 86.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 149.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 183.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 183-4.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 184.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 257.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 257.

⁶⁰ John Wilson Foster. *Irish Novels 1890-1940* (Oxford: Oxford U P, 2008), 464.

⁶¹ Hansen, 6.

⁶² Bowen, *The Last September*, 154.

⁶³ Ibid., 21.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 154.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 175.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 192.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 166.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 166. Just before this, Myra Naylor, says, "Of course one hates to say it, but one does know what Hugo *is*..." This is another situation when a character narrowly avoids sharing something integral about Hugo. A gunshot thwarts Hugo's chance to express his thoughts and social convention silences Myra Naylor's opinion, though her body language enables Mrs. Carey to understand Hugo in way that readers can only speculate about.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁷¹ Ibid., 33.

⁷² Ibid., 33.

⁷³ Ibid., 88.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 88.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁷⁶ Derek Hand. *A History of the Irish Novel* (New York: Cambridge U P, 2011), 183.

⁷⁷ Bowen, *The Last September*, 119.

⁷⁸ Bowen, *The Last September*, 115.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 194.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 248-9.