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**The End of Innocence: Redefining the Heroine in
Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929)**

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Abstract

The protagonist of Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*, Lois Farquar, is presented to us as a girl that has been surrounded by childhood and adolescence's innocence whose transition into adulthood is defined by the Anglo-Irish War, self-discovery and the interactions with the other characters which are depicted as dysfunctional as they are full of silences, words unsaid and lack of comprehension. However, there is a clear inheritance of the nineteenth century novels whose archetype Lois appears to want to embody.

The aim of this paper is to show how these Victorian patterns cannot work in the modern society in which Lois lives. Therefore, Bowen redefines the concept of heroism using modernist techniques such as impressions, fragmentation or the effects of the war itself. Bowen transforms Lois into a modern heroine whose expectations about how her life should be do not correspond to the context she finds herself in.

Keywords: *The Last September*, Elizabeth Bowen, Modernism, Gender, Irish War of Independence, Ascendancy, Heroism.

0. Introduction

The Last September can be related to both Gothic literature and Modernism due to how the author addresses the revolution of class politics and sexuality, especially female sexuality. For instance, she uses “disrupted narrative”, which is characteristic of the Gothic, and the alienation and focus on sexuality and gender of Modernism. Bowen depicts in this novel the story of a class in decline on its way to extinction. According to Declan Kiberd, in *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of a Modern Nation* (1997), what makes this story bittersweet is the ignorance of the main Anglo-Irish characters of the novel that do not see what is going on around them.

Lois Farquar, the main character of this book, is depicted as a young woman belonging to the Ascendancy, who is trying to find her own way in the world she is living in but that is constantly failing due to the fact that she does not know who she is. During Modernism the standards or values that were established throughout the Victorian era were no longer valid and the *Bildungsroman* novels which the protagonist herself is familiar with cannot be applied to her. That creates a crisis to which Lois is exposed as she, up to that point, has been living in the innocence that dictate childhood and adolescence. However, the context in which she finds herself destroys the innocence she has been living in. Lois tries to find herself in a context marked by the decline of her own social class, while she sees herself trapped, the fact that the characters themselves seem to be unable to understand what the political situation is, the effects of a war that we barely see and the almost dysfunctional relationships that are established throughout the book. All these concepts structure the personal journey that Lois goes through in *The Last September* while she tries to define her own identity.

From the point of view of a nineteenth century novel it could be said that Lois is depicted as the heroine of the book. Nevertheless, the idea of heroism used in Victorian

novels cannot be applied in the modern times in which this story takes place. Due to this alteration of context, we find a redefinition of the concept of heroism, heroinism¹ in this case, using modern techniques which is profoundly linked with the previously mentioned theme concerning the protagonist's identity. There are different theories surrounding Lois's identity. Some scholars, such as Susanne S. Cammack (2017), state that it is constructed on two different pillars which are: the gramophone and the "three cracks". Others, as Victoria Coulson, take a different direction explaining that Elizabeth Bowen relies on nineteenth century books such as *Jane Eyre* or *Mansfield Park* which "locate adult subjectivity in the experiences of early childhood" (2009: 378). Edwina Keown (2011), on the other hand, suggests that what really influences the construction of the female character is the fact that the book follows two different traditions: Modernism and the Anglo-Irish Gothic tradition.

The aim of this paper is to study how these archetypes of the Victorian novels are the standards which Lois seems to want to embody but which she is unable to epitomize. A war that we cannot see but that is always there, the lack of functional relationships and a role model to look up to, trauma and incomprehension dictate the personal journey Lois goes through in this book stepping into adulthood leaving innocence behind. The concept of heroism is redefined making Lois the epitome of a modern heroine that seems to be trapped between past expectations of what a woman should be, her social class and the immensity of what she is living.

1. The question of identity

One of the main themes of this novel is the fragmentation and displacement of identity. This is mainly represented in the protagonist, Lois Farquar, in the way she

¹ The word "heroinism" is used by Ellen Moers in *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1977) and it used to refer to heroism performed by a female character.

thinks, how she acts and the decisions she takes. According to Laura Green “Lois is confined to a life she finds unsatisfying, while trying to form an identity in an atmosphere of delusion and detachment” (2015: 35). In this article, “Living on the Hyphen”, Green states how the female protagonist is in a way a target of the Big House she lives in due to the dislocation she feels towards the world that surrounds her. In addition, Lois feels a constant frustration with her own gender. There is a moment in which Lois tells Marda, a guest of the Naylor family, “I hate women. But I can’t think how to begin to be anything else” (Bowen, 1998: 99). According to Laura Green this is the moment in which the protagonist points out how life for women was much more difficult and had restricted options in Irish modern society.

However, even though it is true that her options in her position of a high-class Anglo-Irish young woman stay limited, one of the things that most influences Lois’s lack of objectives is her shortcoming to make her own decisions about her future even though she does have hope about a more prosperous and satisfying life. She wants to escape from the restricted world of the Big House but at the same time, as she is unable to define her own identity, she does not know what she wants to do and, as a consequence, she even doubts about her own feelings. Susan Osborn, in *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*, talks about Lois as an unsuccessful *Femme Fatale* as, even though she aches for love and defining herself, “in the end is content simple to be part of a pattern” (2009: 103). There are three options that Lois considers throughout the novel for her future: marriage, travelling abroad or education. However, she does not seem to be satisfied with any of those possibilities. This is a reflection of the discontentment that she feels not only towards her future but also about her own existence something which is profoundly modernist. The *Bildungsroman* novels, even the ones she has read, cannot be applied to her and as a consequence she feels a constant

isolation and alienation that prevents her from feeling attached to the ones that surround her. At the end of the novel when she, after considering marrying Gerald, her fiancé, travels to France she seems to be finally free from the restrictions she has found so far. Nevertheless, the fact that she is still not sure about whether she wants to do this or not make her still remain under the limitations and subordinated to her social class.

The alienation that Lois feels, especially at Danielstown, reflects the one that the Anglo-Irish class went through during that time. Often the residents of Danielstown describe themselves as, at least, not English and, even though her actions relate them more to the English society, they think of themselves as Irish. However, the political tensions are not seen in this book as Bowen only focuses on the Naylor's lives with their parties and visits. Besides the meeting between Lois and Marda with the IRA rebel we do not see much of the political situation. Nonetheless, war and violence are always there in the background even when the characters do not, or do not want, to see it. Some of these characters also represent this ambivalence or ambiguity in the character's identity such as Hugo and Francie Montmorency, houseguests in Danielstown. When we are told about their lives they seem disorganized or even unconventional and, according to Laura Green (2015), they symbolize this displacement and uncertainty around identity.

The Last September is a novel about visits and departures which reflects this instability that we find throughout the whole novel. Even so, and as I will shortly explain, there are no healthy reciprocal relationships between the characters or between the characters and their environment. The relationships portrayed in this novel finish abruptly. For instance, Marda leaves Danielstown before anything can happen with Hugo or Lois, and Lois and Gerald's relationship goes downhill suddenly. These instabilities come from the insecurity of the characters, especially Lois, about their own

feelings and their inability to connect with one another. It seems as if Lois would had married Gerald, she would have rejected the Irish part of the Anglo-Irish identity. In addition, the moment in which Lois is about to accept Gerald's proposal Lady Naylor (Myra) , her aunt, stops it from happening, so Lois's social class once again traps her.

The protagonist is as well deeply affected by the loss of her mother and the constant references to her prevent Lois from building her own identity. The moment in which she breaks the water jug in the basin so as not to hear what Francie thinks of her can also be interpreted as if Lois does not want to be defined because this way she keeps the freedom to be whoever she wants to be outside Danielstown. Even though, referring again to Susan Osborn (2009), when Marda asks her if she likes "to be the pleasant young person", Lois answers that she likes "to be in a pattern ... to be related; to have to be what I am. Just to *be* is so intransitive, so lonely" (Bowen, 1998: 98).

1.1. The inheritance of the nineteenth century novels

Victoria Coulson states that Elizabeth Bowen relies partly on Victorian novels to build her stories and that these type of novels "locate the determinants of adult subjectivity in the experiences of early childhood, and are especially interested in the formative effects of parental behavior and identity on the lives of their heroes or heroines" (2009: 378). This could certainly be connected to Lois as the fact that she is an orphan does have an impact in her life. She does not have any parental figures, apart from her uncle Richard and his wife, Lady Naylor. Neil Corcoran in *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* states that the lack of Lois's defined identity is a consequence of her mother's death. Corcoran affirms that "In the entrapment and failure represented by her [Laura's] ghosthood, she is what Lois and Laurence understand about the entrapment and failure of the class they come from, and she is what they must

overcome” (2004: 50). However, not having a role model to look up to Lois finds herself stuck inside her social class.

The romantic relationship between Lois and Gerald is a clear example of the redefinition that Bowen presents of this Victorian inheritance. Lois seems to be familiar with the nineteenth century novels in which the female character had very specific goals. She was supposed to be the angel in the house, find a good man with which she would fall in love and get married. Sometimes Lois seems to want to embody these standards, for instance when she is thinking about marrying Gerald. The narrator of the story states that Lois “could not remember, though she had read so many books, *who* spoke first after a kiss had been, not exchanged but – administered” (Bowen, 1998: 152). Throughout the book Lois seems to have the necessity to marry Gerald, to fall in love with him but she is not able to do so even when she tries to force herself to love him. The reader is told that she had learned how love “was the mainspring of woman’s grievances” (Bowen, 1998: 60) and Marda says that she has “never met any woman so determined to love well, so anxious to love soon, so certain of her ability. She [Lois] really prays for somebody to be fatal” (Bowen, 1998: 82). The narrator tells us how Lois “would have loved to love him [Gerald]” (Bowen, 1998: 52). However, Victorian novels were characterized by the *Bildungsroman* pattern in which the character goes through a personal journey that allows him or her to epitomize the values and ideals of the society they live in. Nevertheless, Lois, even though she goes through a personal journey, cannot embody the principles of a society that has lost any sense of morality. Lois is not a Victorian heroine, she is a modernist anti-hero and, therefore, she does not find a traditional happy ending.

1.1.1. Lady Naylor and marriage

Elizabeth Bowen's novel, as stated before, moves away from the Victorian novel in many aspects. It is deeply modernist but there are some scenes in which we can see this inheritance from the nineteenth century Victorian novels. One of these passages is found at the end of the book in which Lady Naylor talks to Gerald about the possibility of him marrying Lois. Throughout the whole book we have read how Lois is not entirely sure about her feelings towards Gerald and wonders whether she should marry him or not. Nevertheless, at the end of the book when she decides she will actually marry him, Myra intercedes.

Lady Naylor does not want Lois to marry Gerald even though the reader does not know exactly why. She justifies herself with the pretext of wanting Lois to have a further education in art, as we are told about her paintings in many instances even though they are only referred to and never seen directly by other characters, or saying that Gerald has actually no money to offer. There are two scenes in which we see Myra trying to manipulate both Lois and Gerald. In the first one Myra tries to make Lois understand that marriage is a life-changing decision and underestimates the feelings Lois may have telling her that she "cannot hope to be always in love" (Bowen, 1998: 167) and that "there is no reason why you [Lois] should marry" (Bowen, 1998: 168). She even uses psychological mechanisms to make Lois feel responsible for making them worry. She tells her that her "uncle would be very much worried" and that she should "be more sensible and considerate" (Bowen, 1998: 168) without really thinking what Lois actually wants. Moreover, having tea with some guests she states how "There's a future for girls nowadays outside marriage" (Bowen, 1998: 174). Lady Naylor seems to advocate for Lois's future outside marriage, even though not forever, urging her to have a career saying how much she would have liked to have one. That is

why, or so it seems, she ends up talking to Gerald in a rather cruel undertone to make him distrust Lois and her intentions.

Lady Naylor tries to make Gerald forget about marriage, talking about the engagement of another soldier, Gerald's friend, to Lois's friend Livvy, telling him that "it doesn't seem fair to a young girl [...] having her name coupled" and that "these early marriages ruin careers, and engagements are nearly as bad" (Bowen, 1998: 179). However, when she sees that he still wants to marry Lois she tells him "But I'm afraid, you know, that she doesn't love you" (Bowen, 1998: 179). From this moment onwards she tries to undermine Gerald's hopes telling him "There is money [...] I mean, you haven't any, have you? Of course, I don't see why you should have" (Bowen, 1998: 180). Even Gerald understands what she is doing and tells her that she is "going to stop it because I'm too young and too poor and not 'county' enough – or whatever I ought to be" (Bowen, 1998: 181). In this scene, as said before, we can see this Victorian inheritance when Lady Naylor talks about social class, money and how convenient, or not in this case, would this marriage be. Even in this situation, in which such a complex and life-changing decision is being decided, Lois does not really have a voice and her social class prevents her from marrying Gerald and keeps her trapped. Lois proves to be unable to break with her class to develop her own identity and make her own way as it is her in the end who tells Gerald their marriage would not be convenient and him who finally leaves her. She seems to have absorbed Myra's way of thinking as she tells Gerald "it's us being so young [...] and then, money. I mean, we have to be practical" (Bowen, 1998: 191). Lois herself talks about how she is a product of her own class here when she says that "One can't move, one doesn't know where one is [...] even what I think isn't my own [...] Even Marda – nothing we said to each other mattered, it hasn't stayed" (Bowen, 1998: 191). Here she expresses her inability to break with her social

class and the conventions that prevent her from becoming an individual being with her own identity. At the end of the scene Gerald is convinced that Lois does not love him while he thinks that “they were both [...] entirely lost” (Bowen, 1998: 192) and leaves her.

This scene can also be interpreted as the end of innocence. Lois finally makes a decision, even though it is influenced by her class, and realizes that she does not really want to marry him and that the moments she thought she wanted to, were influenced by adolescence’s innocence which is completely broken in this passage. This can be seen for instance in the fact that at the beginning of this last conversation between Gerald and Lois, we are told that Laurence, her cousin, has walked on a snail. Just before they say goodbye to each other Lois tells him how she cannot be sure about anything and that in the end nothing seems to matter. In this moment she identifies herself with the snail when she tells him “You don’t know what it’s like for a snail, being walked on” and when he answers “I don’t understand you [...] Who is a snail?” she states “I didn’t ask you to understand me: I was so happy, I was so safe” (Bowen, 1998: 191). Here it can be seen how the innocence she had been living in kept her safe. However, these constant aims to resist an imposed identity and her attempts to find herself at the same time destroy the refuge she had been living in. Moreover, curiously enough, it is Laurence who walks on the snail, so this could represent how once again it is her class and its conventions what crushes her innocence.

1.2. The Anglo-Irish Big House and the Gothic

Edwina Keown (2011), as stated before, expresses that Elizabeth Bowen based this book on two pillars: Modernism and the Anglo-Irish Gothic tradition. As a consequence, the protagonist of this story has some of their characteristics too. A parallel can be found, for instance, in the relationship between Carmilla and her victim,

in Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla*, and Lois and Marda's relationship. Even though never confirmed and with no explicit evidence there seems to be a homoerotic subtext in this relation which surpasses Victorian taboos. As Edwina Keown explains, paraphrasing Margot Backus, "Bowen's metaphors, characters and descriptions conjoin revolutionary forces that seek to tear away the façade of Anglo-Irish society with illicit sexual desires that threaten marriage" (2011: 3).

Another trend that affects the way the protagonist is built is the Big House tradition. According to Laura Green (2015), in *The Last September* Bowen illustrates how the peaceful life in the Big House is not only threatened by the Irish rebels but also by the ignorance of the ones who live in it. The Naylor's ignore, willingly sometimes, what happens outside the walls of Danielstown while worrying about frivolous events such as their parties. For instance, Lady Naylor says that "From all the talk, you might think almost anything was going to happen, but we never listen" (Bowen, 1998: 26) while Richard states that the army is even a nuisance for him as he does not feel they are in danger. This inability of the Anglo-Irish characters to see what is happening right in front of their eyes is a current motif that runs throughout the book and that, even though some characters such as Laurence or Lois have moments in which this motif is broken, stays until the end when the Big House, Danielstown, is burned to the ground. Nevertheless, the only reason why this motif is broken in Lois and Laurence's cases is because they both meet at some point someone from the IRA. The Naylor's keep acting as the Ascendancy even when their position is declining. Because Bowen puts the Big House at the center of the story the reader has the sensation that the house protects the inhabitants and that it also shapes them in a way. Elizabeth Bowen gives Danielstown a female identity and there seems to be a parallel between the main character, Lois, and the Big House that, according to Keown, "verges on the mother-daughter pairing"

(2011: 6). Nevertheless, Lois's biological mother Laura is mentioned in many instances and there is a possibility that Laura represents the dark side of politics and social decline that trap female characters in the Big House. In addition, at the end everyone but the Naylor's leave and they are left to watch their house burn while they have suddenly lost the remaining power they had, their house and, of course, their identity.

1.2.1. Lois and Marda's relationship

In the process of becoming an adult, Lois has a new perspective of her family and her mother. She is divided between the fact that she is motherless and the fact that she needs to break away from the Big House and its memories in order to become who she wants to be. However, Lois does not have a role model to look up to in Danielstown until Marda arrives. Marda is a completely modernist character that seems to have got rid of the baggage of the Anglo-Irish conflict and that is about to marry an Englishman. This relationship echoes the gothic tradition as Bowen relies on *Carmilla* as Marda is presented as Lois's "seducer and rescuer" (Keown, 2011: 8). There are several passages in which we find examples of this relationship but, for instance, it can be seen in the scene in which Lois tries on Marda's coat. In this extract it seems that Lois can taste or feel Marda throughout this garment when the narrator states that "She hoped for the proper agony, finding a coat she could not live without [...] 'Oh, the escape!' she thought, pressing her chin down, fading, dying into the rich heaviness. 'Oh, the *escape* in other people's clothes!'" (Bowen, 1998: 76). According to Edwina Keown, with this simple action Lois is transformed from an adolescent to an adult woman. Meeting Marda Lois seems to finally find someone that will help her to develop her own identity. Knowing about the life Marda has and talking to her is the first moment in which she realizes that she can leave the Big House and her social class behind and join the alternative more modernist lifestyle that Marda has.

Moreover, Lois seems to have a mother-daughter relationship with the house (the great symbol in the mythology of the Ascendancy) but that seems to trap her more than anything else. At the beginning we can see a parallel between the Big House and Lois; nonetheless, Laurence and the protagonist herself foreshadow the fact that the house is going to be burned at the end. We can see how Laurence says “I should like to be here when this house burns” and when Lois tells him that that is quite impossible he responds “Of course it will, though. And we shall be so careful not to notice” (Bowen, 1998: 44) which is related to the running motif of blindness throughout the novel. Later the narrator tells us that “the rooms seemed full of the dusk of oblivion. And she [Lois] hoped that instead of fading to dust in summers of empty sunshine, the carpet would burn with the house in a scarlet night to make one flaming call upon Marda’s memory” (Bowen, 1998: 98). Laurence talks from a political point of view. However, Lois appears to say that she would set the house on fire just for Marda to notice. Maybe this is a way of saying that if the house burns so do the conventions and taboos associated with it. After getting to know Marda and discovering a new way of living that she did not know about, Lois wishes for the house to burn but differently from Laurence. While one is political the other one is more sensual or even desperate. Lois’s wish comes from what many scholars have categorized as attraction towards Marda, not only attraction towards her way of living, but also a lament for the relationship that could be but it is not.

2. Heroinism

In many passages of the novel it can be seen that Elizabeth Bowen relied on some of the Romantic or Victorian concepts of heroinism. For instance, Ellen Moers (1977) explains how Mary Wollstonecraft in one of her novels described a heroine that was a fully sexual being, that is to say, a passionate heroine. On the other hand, Moers

also states how George Eliot in *Middlemarch* wanted Dorothea to be an epic heroine but realized that there was nothing epic about her and that she was a “tragic failure”. We can see both types of heroinism in *The Last September*. Lois is constantly, or feels that she is constantly, failing. She does not know who she is, what she wants to do, what career she wants to have or even if she loves Gerald. However, she is a passionate character, she wants to love Gerald and marry him but she cannot. Moreover, with Marda, Lois’s sexuality is also explored even though not explicitly. In addition, we can also see that as in some Austen novels, in which walking is a symbol for independent womanhood, for Lois walking is a way towards freedom.

We can see instances of that, for example, at the beginning of the book when after dinner all the characters retire to their rooms but Lois goes out. During her walk she finds a man on the street that does not see her as she tries to go unnoticed. The scene is described as terrifying and Lois seems to be paralyzed by the man. However, when she goes back to Danielstown she thinks of it as something exciting she wants to share with the others even though at the end she does not do so. Entering the Big House her great adventure starts to diminish because

she had just surprised life at a significant angle in the shrubbery. But it was impossible to speak of this. At a touch from Aunt Myra adventure became literary, to Uncle Richard it suggested an inconvenience; a glance from Mr. Montmorency or Laurence would make her encounter sterile. But what seemed more probable was that they would not listen (Bowen, 1998: 35).

This is related directly with what John Mepham states in *British Fiction After Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century* (2007) in which he explains how most relationships are dysfunctional, full of silences and lack of comprehension. This is what happens to Lois in this book. She has felt misunderstood and ignored all her life to the point that she feels no one can really understand her.

We can also spot certain parallels with *Emma* by Jane Austen. In *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (1977), Ellen Moers explains that Emma is always wrong because she is a product of bad teaching. The same thing happens to Lois. While motherhood was very important in past times in teaching heroism in *The Last September* we are presented a context in which Lois is motherless and she has no strong image or role model to follow. Moreover, most of the characters do not seem to care much about her, so isolation is the key to understand her process of growing up. In the end she is, in a way, educating herself. According to Moers a remote space where feminine authority can reign is also necessary. In *The Last September* those moments in which we see this feminine authority are usually not in remote spaces but when characters are isolated from the rest. For instance, in Marda's room when Lois tries on her coat, or when she realizes that there is a world outside the Big House and its conventions. Bowen takes these concepts of heroism and redefines them using modernist techniques in order to create some standards that Lois can embody.

2.1. The three cracks

Some scholars, such as Susanne S. Cammack (2017), state that Lois's identity is also built or defined by what they call the "three cracks" which Lois notices throughout the book and that each one of them is accompanied by certain violence, which is a running motif that we do not see clearly but that is always there. The first crack Lois notices is at the beginning of the novel when she hears Myra and Francie talk about her. When Lois hears Francie say "Because Lois is so very –" (Bowen, 1998: 59) she feels terrified as she does not want to know what she is. Consequently, she breaks a water jug and the noise she makes prevents Francie from finishing her sentence. Later Lois "noticed a crack in the basin, running between a sheaf and a cornucopia: a harvest richness to which she each day bent down her face. Every time, before the water

clouded, she would see the crack: every time she would wonder: what Lois *was* – She would never know” (Bowen, 1998: 60). According to Cammack, “The crack in the basin becomes a long-standing record of this intense encounter with identity” (2017: 140). Neil Corcoran (2001) also suggests an interpretation of this passage stating that this violence needed to create this crack is a symbol of the crevice that can be found in any kind of identity. That is to say, that it is a symbol of the resistance that Lois puts up in being explicitly identified with just one concept or label. “The cracked basin serves again as a record of the violent passivity (oxymoronic though it may seem) embedded in Lois’s Anglo-Irish identity” (Cammack, 2017: 141) as she is resisting identifying herself with either English people or Irish, wanting to stay undefined.

The second moment in which there is a reference to the cracks is in the scene of the mill. The narrator tells us how “Cracks ran down; she expected, now with detachment, to see them widen, to see the walls peel back from a cleft – like the House of Usher’s” (Bowen, 1998: 124). Neil Corcoran suggests that they are an expansion of the one we find in Lois’s basin that function as “the fissure opening between a politically and historically exhausted past and a potentially non-existent future” (2001: 318). He also refers to the fact that Bowen mentions Poe’s House of Usher which fell down after its secret was discovered. Corcoran sees a parallel with this scene in the mill in which “the terrible secret of Anglo-Irish history remain[s] architecturally articulate on the land” (2001: 326).

The third reference is found at the end of the book when Lois is talking to Daventry at a party, especially, when he is trying to tell her something about Gerald and the war. However, the gramophone suddenly breaks, and it is as if suddenly Daventry cannot talk or communicate with her. Lois notices that “The cracks of the walls that had been straight a minute ago like bars now seemed to bulge out visibly” (Bowen, 1998:

158). According to Cammack, without the gramophone Lois cannot longer communicate and she has become a “broken record” (2017: 143). She is no longer able to express herself and, as a consequence, she cannot have a meaningful conversation with anyone. It is impossible for her to communicate with Gerald during the last conversation they have and after his death she talks to no one about that. It is through the gramophone that Lois tells her story and the Anglo-Irish War is recorded. With the death of the gramophone additionally ends the record of the war. Lois leaves Ireland less than a fortnight after Gerald dies and we know nothing else about the war until Danielstown is burned to the ground.

2.2. Walking

Another aspect which has a very important role in the novel is walking as, to a certain extent, it defines the Anglo-Irish class and consequently the war endangers that activity. It can be observed in the scene in which Marda and Lois go for a walk with Mr. Montmorency and find the Irish rebel in the mill. This man tells them “It is time [...] that yourselves gave up walking. If yez have nothing better to do, yez had better keep within the house while y’have it” (Bowen, 1998: 125), that is to say, that the war itself threatened their class and their way of living. However, it is important how this is connected with how Lois’s identity is constructed because, as Russell McDonald states, “Lois attempts to benefit from walking’s capacity to foster personal growth, using it to connect with the physical world, explore new relationships, satisfy her curiosity, and expand the bounds of her limited experience” (2015: 385). This is part of the inheritance that the book has from Victorian and Romantic novels. For instance, in Austen, walking was an activity that middle-class and upper-class people could choose to do. In this book, as in Bowen’s *Seven Winters*, walking is seen as a dangerous thing to do. Even though the places they walk through are familiar they seem as unstable and uncertain as

the Irish nationality. This can also be seen in some books by James Joyce such as *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or *Ulysses*. Both of them insist and make relevant how important it is to confront those dangers; however, in Bowen's books historical, geographical and gendered elements need also consideration. In her memoirs Bowen states how important walking is "in the interrelated tasks of training the artist's imagination and establishing his or her sense of Irish identity" (McDonald, 2015: 394).

Lois's unstable and undefined identity can also be related to what Bowen herself wrote in *Seven Winters*: "The tense distances that one slowly demolished gave a feeling of undertaking to any walk" (Bowen, 1984: 31). She uses the verb "demolished" and for McDonald this "suggests that negotiating the city on foot meant developing proficiency in the kind of creative destruction one must also utilise in formulating and continually reformulating one's national identity" (2015: 396). In *The Last September* walking is also a motif, it is used to pass the time, it is typical to do when a guest leaves and is used additionally to show this inheritance of English Romanticism. We are told that Lady Naylor used to "sleep with Shelley under her pillow. She used to walk alone in the mountains" (Bowen, 1998: 120).

For instance, in one of the first dinners they have with Mr. and Mrs. Montmorency, Lois talks about the fact that there is a rumor stating that there are guns buried on the ground and asks Francie to go out with her. Sir Richard's answer to this is to criticize how soldiers have nothing better to do but make women want to go out searching for guns. The authoritarian tone he uses is also used as a symbol of how women at that time were not only threatened by the dangers outside the house but also by the men of their own class who wanted to control their actions. Furthermore, Lois not only finds perils outside the house but also inside. We are told that "Going through to her room at nights Lois often tripped with her toe in the jaws of a tiger; a false step at

any time sent some great claw skidding over the polish” (Bowen, 1998: 10). According to McDonald “the tiger rug that virtually attacks Lois symbolises the masculine violence lurking beneath the façade of Anglo-Irish society and threatening to collapse it from within [...] Since staying inside the house amounts to being held captive by such violence, Lois longs to find empowerment walking outside” (2015: 399). Later when she goes out she finds a man who is a threat to her as “he might well have been a murderer” (Bowen, 1998: 34). We are told that “His intentness burnt on the dark an almost invisible trail [...] The crowd of trees straining up from the passive disputed earth, each sucking up and exhaling the country’s essence – swallowed him finally.” (Bowen, 1998: 34). Afterwards however, she seems to adopt something of that man’s way of walking. When she arrives home she does not tell her relatives what has happened as she thinks that doing it “would make her encounter sterile” (Bowen, 1998: 35) but, in addition, she does not tell her uncle she is home forcing him to stay awake and leave the house unlocked. She demonstrates towards Sir Richard the same unawareness that the rebel showed towards her and, according to McDonald, this way she carries out an act of female empowerment as she maintains a moment which marks her as vital instead of sterile. However, some critics state that this is also a way of exemplifying how Anglo-Irish values were in decay.

2.3. Dysfunctional relationships

According to John Mepham in the fiction written between 1870 and the 1930s communication between characters is represented to be almost impossible. This author states that conversations are constantly interrupted “within a general culture of incomprehension and thwarted intimacy” (2015: 61). The reason why this happens is that in modern times, life is constantly interrupted by warfare, the telephone, public music or just a crowded street but also by the impulses of the characters. In *The Last*

September this kind of interruptions are portrayed in many instances. For example, we find the previously mentioned scene in which Lois interrupts Myra and Francie's conversation by breaking the water jug in the basin. However, it is also important to note that the narrator of the book leads us to believe that these interruptions have been happening during Lois's whole life. Instead of presenting us extracts in which we can see this lack of communication, which we also get to see, the narrator decides, most of the time, to show us the consequences of this. We find many passages in which we are told that Lois knows that Mr. Montmorency "would not take the trouble to understand her" (Bowen, 1998: 8), that Laurence is indifferent "to every shade of her personality" (Bowen, 1998: 11), that "she felt profoundly lonely, suspecting once more for herself a particular doom of exclusion" (Bowen, 1998: 23), or that when she talked sometimes "no one took any notice" (Bowen, 1998: 29). John Mepham, in addition, states that in Elizabeth Bowen's novels it is through these dysfunctional relations that "the real nastiness and cruelty and deviousness of other people is seen, even if not understood" (2015: 67). It is true that in *The Last September* no character is totally good or bad as being modernist characters their personalities are constantly in *flux* and are ambiguous. However, it is in these instances, in which the narrator tells the reader how lonely or misunderstood Lois feels, that we can see the selfish facet of the family members and those who surround Lois.

Nevertheless, an aspect which is also very important here is the figure of the gramophone. As said before, some scholars, such as Cammack (2017), argue that Lois appears to have a parallel with the gramophone. She seems to talk or be able to explain her experiences through this object and when it breaks at the end of the novel she is unable to communicate with anyone. The interruptions of the past, the present incomprehension and Lois's inability to express herself at the end of the novel

contribute to the constant mystery of Lois's identity and to how she is constructed as a modern heroine. Contrary to Victorian female characters that at the end had happy endings, most of the times, Lois at the end of the novel still feels "humiliated the whole time" (Bowen, 1998: 187) thinking of herself as "quite an outcast" (Bowen, 1998: 197). Nevertheless, all of this weak interactions and the lack of communication and comprehension can be a symbol, as Declan Kiberd explains in *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (1997), of a society in which expression of true feeling was unacceptable.

2.4. The mirrors

In *Mirrors Are Magic* Elizabeth Bowen discusses mirrors' function and what the reflection they give us back mean. Bowen states that "Mirrors (with which go expanses of mirrored surfaces) enlarge life. They extend, or seem to extend, space; they increase light. They make less that sense of constriction, of claustrophobia" (2008: 203) and that maybe they "mitigate city solitude" (2008: 203). As a consequence of this "Never is one quite alone in a mirrored room – and there can be times when solitude could be restful, still more times when one would not wish to be watched, least of all, by one's ever-critical self" (2008: 204). She states that being in big rooms full of mirrors with other people can make you feel part of the community or society to which you belong. However, she concludes this essay saying that "What I do not believe is that a mirror gives me any idea of *me*. Looking into a mirror deliberately, I see nothing but a person looking deliberately into a mirror. My few but for that reason notable self-encounters have been unsought, a matter of chance or accident" (2008: 205).

In *The Last September* there are a few instances and passages in which we can spot mirrors or in which the characters, especially Lois, see their own reflection. In the first one the narrator tells us that Lois "ran to the glass, changed a necklace, had an

apprehensive interchange with her own reflection” (Bowen, 1998: 20). This of course is also linked to the question of identity that has been discussed throughout this paper. When seeing oneself in a mirror there is always the question whether what the person sees is the reality or just the reflection of what they think they are going to find. Lois interchanges an “apprehensive” look with her own reflection as if she does not want to know what she is; as if she wants to stay undefined. The last instance in which we spot mirrors is when we are told that Lois is “standing affectedly on the Danielstown steps with a tin of biscuits, a room of mirrors behind her” (Bowen, 1998: 200). We find this last scene after Gerald has left and she is alone. She is turning her back to the mirrors, not seeing her own reflection, not wanting to see herself which could be analyzed as another kind of resistance in being defined. This could also be linked to, for instance, Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms* by Hemingway as she sees herself in the mirror and states “I never felt like a whore before” (2004: 137). For Catherine this is an epiphany, a moment in which she realizes something about herself and even though the reader is not sure whether this is true, for her surely it is. Instead of that, Lois does not face this epiphany; she turns her back to the mirrors staying that way with an undefined identity, staying once again in between labels. Relating this with what Bowen wrote in her essay, she stated that mirrors can make you feel less claustrophobic or less lonely and Lois seems to move away from this idea. Despite the fact that she could feel claustrophobic or lonely in that house from which she wants to go out and free herself from its restrictions, she does not seem to be able to find her freedom as she turns her back to the possible way out.

3. Conclusion

It could be said that this book shows the reader how past Victorian values are no longer appropriate for modern times. It can be seen in the journey Lois Farquar, the

modern heroine, goes through in this novel and in how her ideas of how her life should be contrast with the indifference, alienation and incomprehension of her real life. Elizabeth Bowen redefines the concept of heroism from nineteenth century values to the 1920s context. Besides, Bowen incorporates into this equation the consequences of the Anglo-Irish War and the fact that Lois is part of a social class that is on its way to extinction. Modern techniques such as fragmentation, impressions and reflections, dysfunctional relationships and characters whose personality is always changing are used to create this redefinition of the Victorian values and, at the same time, give the reader clues of the political situation in which this story takes place but that none of the characters appears to fully understand.

Contrary to what usually would happen in a Victorian novel, Lois's personal journey does not lead her towards a happy ending. She has actually a rather indifferent finale in which the reader does not get to know if she is happy with the way things have worked out. In addition, her constant resistance towards staying undefined fails in the end as it is her social class which influences her final decisions. She leaves the Big House but we are not sure if she really gets to detach herself from its conventions. As usually happens with modernist characters, Lois fails in finding herself and ends up doing what her aunt Myra wanted her to do. Feeling as an outcast and a failure because she does not succeed in the only thing that she appears to be sure about, which is not letting others define her, she feels like "A painter who cannot paint [...] No end to all that I cannot do" (Bowen, 1998: 97).

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