"A Cake for which the Flour had been Forgotten": The Escape from Queer Nonentity in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*

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Abstract

Building upon the popular notion that Lois's growth in The Last September remains stunted, this paper posits that the young protagonist, who even wallows in a state of queer nonentity, does, in fact, grow up. Employing Virginia Woolf's concept of the artist's self-effacing androgynous mind, the paper traces how Lois's androgynous qualities seem to keep her in a state of limbo, in which her identity is void or frozen, not unlike that of her Protestant Ascendancy class in 1920. However, both Lois's political and sexual maturation, which culminates in the ruined mill scene at the end of the novel's second section, is set in motion by the guidance of Marda Norton, who, also possessing androgynous characteristics, serves as Lois's mirror figure but, embodying a more experienced and established identity, disapproves of Lois's kind of void-inducing queerness. Although the end of the novel points to the notion that both Marda and the now-mature Lois still face the constant threat of being, again, stunted, their existence attests to the survival of the Ascendancy, albeit in a less complacent state, as Danielstown, the symbol of the Anglo-Irish Big House culture, is being burned down at the end.

Keywords: nonentity, queerness, androgyny, maturation, *The Last September*

In *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (2012), Jed Esty puts forth a claim that modernist aesthetics against the backdrop of modern colonialism adopts the form of the bildungsroman – what can be called the hallmark of nineteenth-century novels – only to expose and disrupt its conventions in recording the coming of age of its protagonists (pp. 2-3). To criticize the status quo, reconsider the biographical novel and, at the same time bring into relief what they see as problematics in the ongoing mainstream discourse regarding self, nation and empire, many modernist novels of early twentieth-century major writers such as Conrad, in *Lord Jim* (1900), Woolf, in *The Voyage Out* (1915) and Joyce, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), have at each of their centers "the figure of stunted youth" operating their narrative times through "youthful protagonists

who conspicuously *do not grow up*" (Esty, 2012, pp. 2-3). "In open and sustained violation of the developmental paradigm that seemed to govern nineteenth-century historical and fictional forms, such novels," so Esty observes, "tend to present youthful protagonists who die young, remain suspended in time, eschew vocational and sexual closure, refuse social adjustment or establish themselves as evergreen souls via the tender offices of the *Kunstlerroman*" (Esty, 2012, pp. 2-3). These characteristics, which Esty has observed in a number of modernist novels, indeed speak to the nineteen-year-old Lois Farquar in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929). Reflecting modernity in all its aspects at the turn of the century in the period known as modernist, Esty's (2012) explanation for the notable revision of the developmental logic of the late bildungsroman relies on what he perceives as "a shift in scale" (p. 7). Instead of attaching to the relatively more stable temporal frames of the national building, the shifting bildungsroman adheres to "a more conspicuously global, and therefore more uncertain, frame of social reference," which leads to the disruption of the conventional developmental trajectory (Esty, 2012, p. 7).

This expanse in outlook serves as a segue into a discussion of *The Last September*, which revolves around September of 1920, the point in time which Matthew Brown (2012) describes as the "fitful last September of the Republic's colonial ties to England, with [the Anglo-Irish's] historical role as settlers-colonialists" (p. 4); therefore, the time when the Anglo-Irish were coerced out of their big-house complacency to look beyond themselves. Honing in on just *The Last September* in his article – published five years before *Unseasonable Youth* – Esty (2007) demonstrates how Elizabeth Bowen's second novel, employing the "motif of the retarded juvenile," likewise makes use of the tropes of frozen youth and uneven development (p. 260). Harboring her "freeze-dried virginity," Lois is deemed by Esty to be, for example, "a stubbornly nebulous figure at the center of the plot, one whose youth never takes on the sharp edges of maturity" (Esty, 2007, p. 260), and as "a frozen-adolescent figure whose own uneven development seems to correspond to the temporal oddities of the surrounding colonial history" (Esty, 2007, p. 258). The warped paradigm of Lois's bildungsroman is fittingly emblematic of the Anglo-Irish extinction, capturing, in Esty's succinct words, "the historically frozen, politically vexed, permanently adolescent status of the Ascendancy itself, the anachronistic and futureless class projected by this novel" (Esty, 2007, p. 259).

Esty's (2007) emphasis on what he sees as Lois's stunted growth or signs of immaturity, indeed, resonates with comments from other literary critics. Examining the significant prevalence of the gramophone in the novel, Susanne Cammack (2017) points to how the recording process of the machine bears connections to Lois's own flawed act of recording the history which is unfolding right in front of her. Apart from the physical injury that befell Thomas Edison during his discovery of the technology for recording voices, as remarked by Cammack, the process of

recording itself is inherently violent since it involves the piercing and scratching of wax cylinders, "creating physical scars on that medium that could, in turn, be replayed" (Cammack, 2017, pp. 134-135). Considered side by side with Lois's own proximity to violence and her ensuing fear and anxiety, the gramophone is no less a "prosthesis" to Lois or vice versa, "an extension of her own body" and "to turn it off is like an amputation" (Cammack, 2017, p. 136). However, the difference between the two and what can also be deemed to be Lois's immaturity lies in the fact that Lois lacks the ability to faithfully and forcefully relate her experience – or what Cammack phrases as "her ability to reproduce her gramophonic trauma accounts," citing how Lois chooses not to report the sighting of the nationalist in a trench-coat for fear of being misconstrued or simply not being listened to by the adults or even Lawrence (Cammack, 2017, p. 139).

In addition, Bernadette Trehy (2011) also points out how although the readers are encouraged to share Lois's fear and anxiety and have empathy for her as she attempts to actively respond to, and meaningfully interact with, the world she finds herself in, Lois – together with Lawrence, "the two young people nearest the narrative centre of the novel – is just as aimless and helpless as the Montmorencys" (p. 51). Focusing as well on the scene of the trench-coated rebel, Trehy (2011) points out how Lois, with her sense of self far from being established, is actually drawn to the rebel's "sense of belonging," "a real sense of purpose and conviction," or "an identity based on a sense of possession that she lacks" (p. 57). Reflecting on the trench-coated nationalist, Lois thinks how "[i]t must be because of Ireland he was in such a hurry; down from the mountains making a short cut through the demesne. *Here was something else that she could not share*" (Bowen, 2000, p. 42; emphasis added).

Nevertheless, the claim that Lois fits in with the trope of stunted youth and never reaches the awareness that comes with maturation can lose some of its vigor if we consider how Lois, in a number of instances, shows insight into a situation, to which other more mature characters in the novel can be oblivious. For instance, Neil Corcoran (2001) presents the claim that Lois, together with Lawrence – as the two orphaned youths who stand out among the residents of Danielstown as both of them actually come into contact with a member of the IRA – shares throughout the novel "a view of the 'situation' far removed from the myopia or deliberate blindness of the other Anglo-Irish characters" (p. 322). Moreover, in response to the subaltern Smith, who tells them of his plan to seek advancement in colonial East Africa once the situation in Ireland is settled for the English, both Lois and Lawrence evince their historical acumen and their grasp of the situation, by detecting in the dialogue "a ring of the past," presumably knowing that their race stands no chance – "They both had a sense of detention, of a prologue being played out too lengthily, with unnecessary stress, a wasteful attention to detail. Apart, but not quite unaware of each other, queerly linked by antagonism, they both sat drinking tea with dissatisfaction, *resentful at giving so much of themselves to what was to be forgotten*

[emphasis added]" (Bowen, 2000, p. 170). Picking up on these moments of startling maturation, this essay, attempting to add nuance to the important concept of Esty's stunted youth, argues that, indeed, the "frozen-adolescent" Lois, whose identity points to the state of queer nonentity, does grow up. Her coming of age, which reaches its peak in the ruined mill scene at the conclusion of Part Two, is made possible through Marda Norton, who, being ten years older than Lois and sharing with her similar androgynous qualities, acts as a kind of mirror figure, a role model for the young protagonist. However, resembling the futureless class that she herself represents, there is a sense that, despite her maturation, Lois is ultimately made to stay "frozen," unable, in the end, to escape her class's destiny.

Prior to "the Visit of Miss Norton," Part Two of Bowen's (2000) novel, Lois's identity is emblematic of immaturity as it is clearly something unfinished and without force, struggling between moments of staying growth and desiring growth, as if in keeping with the concept of Ireland as virginal, the notion that the novel tellingly puts forth through its male characters of both generations. To begin with, Esty (2007) offers an intriguing analysis of the opening scene, showing how Lois's identity is fixated, right from the outset, on the notion of "cancelled time" (p. 260). Enclosed in the phrase "[i]n those days," which points back to the past, Lois shows her determination to stay youthful as "she [knows] how fresh she must look, like other young girls," and as "[s]he wishe[s] she could freeze the moment and keep it always" (Bowen, 2000, pp. 3-4). In addition, Lois's physical description proves illuminating: "in repose her lips met doubtfully, in a never determined line, so that she never seemed to have quite finished speaking" (Bowen, 2000, p. 33). One gets the sense that Lois's remarks often go unnoticed as, at one time for example, she suggests sitting out on the steps for the night, "no one answered or cared and a conversation went on without her" and "she felt profoundly lonely, suspecting *once more* [emphasis added] for herself a particular doom of exclusion" (Bowen, 2000, p. 26). Moreover, upon walking up the avenue and witnessing an IRA member – an event that excites her and brings a sense of adventure – Lois ultimately decides "it [is] impossible to speak of this," being aware of how the words coming out of her mouth are bound to be fragile and lose their intended meaning – "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" (Bowen, 2000, p. 43). Therefore, Lois's identity in the novel's first section is, indeed, very much in a state of limbo or uncertainty, marked by action without any real result. Describing the anteroom that Lois personally likes and regularly frequents, which is itself symbolic of an attenuated identity being a room whose purpose is to ironically open onto other rooms, the narrative goes on to inform how Lois's life is "complicated by not knowing how much of what she had said had been overheard, or by whom, or how far it would go" (Bowen, 2000, pp. 6-7).

Although Lois sometimes feels the urge to reclaim her identity – suspecting as earlier mentioned "a particular doom of exclusion," she thinks "[she] must break in on all this" (Bowen, 2000, p. 26) – she yet resists the opportunity of giving definiteness to her identity. Overhearing the conversation about her between Lady Naylor and Mrs. Montmorency, Lois sends an angry and aggressive signal that makes the act of defining stop, the sentence "Because Lois is so very –" remaining forever dangling – "She lifted her water jug and banged it down in the basin: she kicked the slop-pail and pushed the washstand about ... [ellipsis in text] It was victory. Later on, she 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" (Bowen, 2000, pp. 82-83). The exact spot where the crack runs – "between a sheaf and a cornucopia" – is interpreted by Corcoran (2001) as not only a fissure in Lois's personal but also her sexual identity (p. 320). Lois's figuratively cracked sexual identity, the "harvest richness" which would no longer entail proper reproduction, is in accordance with the notion that, prior to the conclusion of the Ascendancy, emblematized by the sexually-charged scarlet burning of the big houses at the end of the novel, Ireland remains virginal. Lawrence puts forth this idea of the virginal Ireland in his conversation with Hugo, asking, "Talking of being virginal, do you ever notice this country? Doesn't sex seem irrelevant?" (Bowen, 2000, p. 56) His interlocutor indirectly agrees, yielding that "[t]here certainly are a great many unmarried women," propelling Lawrence to definitively conclude that "[i]t is" and that "children seem in every sense of the word to be inconceivable" (Bowen, 2000, p. 56). After all, this whole affair of identity in limbo may be boiled down, as Lois herself suggests, to gender. Lamenting what feels like her sex's inconsequence, stemming from preoccupying herself with cutting out a dress she does not even need, Lois rhetorically asks Gerald, "How is it that in this country that ought to be full of such violent realness there seems nothing for me but clothes and what people say? I might as well be in *some kind of a cocoon* [emphasis added]" (Bowen, 2000, p. 66).

Indeed, far more than just a stunted or frozen growth or an identity that is yet to reach maturity, Lois's identity can be deemed to be void as the result of the canceling out of her opposing gender qualities. In the other passage where a character in the novel attempts to unequivocally define his country, in this case Anglo Ireland specifically, Hugo describes the Anglo-Irish as neither British nor Irish but something empty altogether: "A few more hundred deaths, I suppose, on our side – which is no side – rather scared, rather isolated, not expressing anything except tenacity to something that isn't there – that never was there" (Bowen, 2000, p. 177). As the personal is always translated to the national in *The Last September*, Lois's identity, in a similar way to her unfinished, sexually fissured identity, speaks to the precarious, virginal state of Ireland in September 1920, being equated with voidness in its androgynous tendency. Confiding in Marda that she objects to being a woman – "I hate women. But I can't think of how to begin to be anything else" –

Lois likewise objects to the idea of being a man – "But I wouldn't like to be a man" – thus situating herself in the gender void of being neither male nor female or of encompassing both altogether (Bowen, 2000, p. 142). The notion that androgyny ultimately leads to the effacement of one's identity could not have been new in 1929, the year *The Last September* was published. In *A Room of One's Own*, which also came out in 1929, but whose ideas Virginia Woolf had been floating around in the lectures given to students at the women's colleges at Cambridge since 1928, Woolf, one of Bowen's influences, promotes the concept of the androgynous mind at the end of her book as the type of mind that all artists should aspire to. Though pointing straightforwardly to the state of mind where the masculine is equal to the feminine – "the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating" – Woolf (1989) ultimately frames the androgynous mind as the state in which someone can escape their sex at the moment of creating an imaginative work and strip themselves of their identity or consciousness altogether (p. 98). It is "fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex ... to be a man or woman pure and simple; *one must be woman-manly or man-womanly* [emphasis added]. It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; *in any way to speak consciously as a woman* [emphasis added]" (Woolf, 1989, p. 104). In other words, Woolf's state of the androgynous mind is when the gender binary oppositions are transcended. When one is being both a man and a woman equally – being "woman-manly or man-womanly" – one can be said to be neither. The binary oppositions actually cancel each other out, so that one no longer, as Woolf must intend, possesses what can be deemed as distinctively male or distinctively female, distinctively masculine or distinctively feminine; hence, a state of queer nonentity.

However, the connection we can readily draw between Bowen and Woolf does not stop there. The latter also creates a female protagonist in her first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915), Rachel Vinrace, in the trope of the stunted youth, who, echoing the critique of Lois, is proclaimed by Esty (2012) to remain "stubbornly, insipidly young" (p. 132). Esty (2012) also points out how *The Voyage Out* is "a version of the colonial bildungsroman, in which underdeveloped or peripheral space grounds and allegorizes stubbornly youthful protagonists" (p. 125). Rachel's destination, the fictional island of Santa Marina in South America, is first "dimly Spanish, then briefly English, then Spanish again for three hundred years of apparent social stasis, then English again, made over into a holiday spot for the shabby genteel" (Esty, 2021, p. 132). Being likened to Santa Marina which shares her identity crisis, Rachel, in turn, echoes Lois who is not only situated between not being Irish and not being English but also between not being a man and not being a woman.

As a painter, Lois, who objects to both being a woman and being a man, might be subject to the void-inducing androgynous mind of the artist. Indeed, the novel toys with the idea of Lois's nonentity throughout. In a conversation with Livvy about love, inspired by the performance of the poem "Melisande," Lois feels that "she herself must be like a cake for which the flour had been forgotten"

(Bowen, 2000, p. 106). At one point, Lois recalls with surprise that "she had cried for a whole afternoon before the War because she was not someone in a historical novel" (Bowen, 2000, p. 108). In addition, the novel plays with the possibility of Lois not having been born more than once. At night while expecting a raid on Danielstown, Lawrence imagines the turn of events where Hugo Montmorency really had been granted the chance to marry Laura Naylor as desired and "Lois, naturally, was not born at all" (Bowen, 2000, p. 154). Earlier, Hugo, urged by Lois to make an inquiry about her late mother's romantic propensity, entertains the same fantasy – "If she and I had married ... My dear child, you wouldn't be here" (Bowen, 2000, p. 88). Furthermore, Lois's cracked sexual identity makes her kiss with Gerald lead to a state of nonexistence – "So that was being kissed: just an impact, with inside blankness. She was lonely, and saw there was no future. She shut her eyes and tried ... to be enclosed in nonentity, in some ideal no-place perfect and clear as a bubble" (Bowen, 2000, p. 127). After all, while emphasizing Lois's frozen adolescence, Esty (2007) notes her uneven development – her being caught up in "the unsteady, uneven temporal mix that both retards Lois and then hurtles her into the future" – in a way that, again, results in the canceling out of opposites: "Strictly speaking, then, *The Last September* is neither a bildungsroman nor an anti-bildungsroman but a novel that deliberately splices together the anti-progressive time of Anglo-Irish history and the progressive conventions of the coming-of-age novel" (p. 262). This tactic of Bowen's in creating gender fluidity in her protagonist answers the question Esty (2012) poses in *Unseasonable Youth*: "How are the traditional closural plots of the bildungsroman, particularly heterosexual coupling and marriage, affected and infected by feminist and queer experience?" (pp. 14-15). Needless to say, what is being implied is that an element of queerness has something to do with the stoppage or the cancellation of identity, which is central to the modernist violation of nineteenth-century bildungsroman conventions.

Significantly, we also detect androgyny in Marda. The physical description of Marda that is passed onto us at length is that "[s]he was tall, her back as she stood looking over the fields was like *a young man's in its vigorous slightness. She escaped the feminine pear-shape* [emphasis added], her shoulders were square, legs long from the knee down" (Bowen, 2000, p. 114). Indeed, both Lois and Marda reflect each other to the extent that, at one point, the two's identities seem to run into one another for Gerald as he, being in the presence of Marda's and not yet Lois's, is fantasizing, contemplating his plan of kissing Lois – "And now as, looking at Marda, he once more kissed Lois's hands, he knew once more – assured by her eyes – that keen truth of the early showing of daylight" (Bowen, 2000, p. 121). The two female figures, in fact, mirror each other when Marda states, "I don't lose things except coming here; I am efficient really. But there seems a kind of fatality ... [ellipsis in text]," to which Lois replies, "I *know*" (Bowen, 2000, p. 110). Nevertheless, unlike Lois's frozen or void identity, one gets the sense that Marda's identity is established, thus being fit to be the one who will navigate Lois out of her

nonentity, leading her on to the path of maturity. For instance, unlike the impression of always giving an unfinished product that accompanies Lois's lips, Hugo remarks that "[Marda's] features, the dark line of hair springing over the white square of forehead were, in their special relation, like *something almost too clearly written that he still could read* [emphasis added]" (Bowen, 2000, p. 118). Moreover, being asked by Lois about whether she ever had "any difficulty about beginning," Marda casually replies, "I can't remember. I never can see back to the other side of things that have happened," signaling that she has got past the uncertainty of the Anglo-Irish situation, being set to marry Leslie Lawe in England. As Lois wallows in nonentity and futurelessness and sees no importance in time – being asked by Marda what date it is, Lois replies, "I don't know. Does it matter?" – the narrative narrates how it is otherwise for the fully fledged Marda: "Evidently it did matter; Marda had to unpack the bottom of the suitcase and look the date up in a pocketbook" (Bowen, 2000, p. 144).

In contrast with Lois's "particular doom of exclusion," the force in Marda's identity is without doubt. Marda represents a disruptive force in the static Anglo-Irish way of life, an assault on the muffled atmosphere of Danielstown, which, though situated in the midst of a violent scene, has never really directly experienced violence. The fact that Marda's presence is set in the middle section is in itself telling, signifying a structure that is significantly broken in the middle and would be hard to fix, much like the middle section "Time Passes" in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927), which, standing in for the duration of the Great War, embodies the significant, unexpected deaths of a number of characters. In addition, the history of Marda's visits to Danielstown, as recounted by Lois, has been one marked by disruption, from the time when Marda was little and cut her knee, creating "a good deal of fuss and bloodiness," to the time when she lost an engagement ring after breaking the engagement, rendering people "all very much upset" (Bowen, 2000, p. 107). As the narrative tells us, "[f]rom all their angles [Marda] seemed to them *very modern*, [emphasis added]" (Bowen, 2000, p. 112). Marda would not thus be haunted by Lois's "ring of the past." That they, the Naylors and the Montmorencies, do not exactly know how to make sense of Marda is reinforced by Sir Richard attaching to her a foreign element, saying, "one would think she had come from America" (Bowen, 2000, p. 112). Instead of inducing the state of void like Lois's, Marda's androgynous body exudes a sense of wide-awake consciousness and full force as, following her physical description aforementioned, the narrative narrates how "[s]tanding vaguely she had still that quality of directedness – from which they all swerved off in their different ways. A hardy awareness of self in her heightened one's own consciousness. Her lightest look watched, her casual listening assessed, her speech was a lightning attack on one's integrity out of the stronghold of her indifference" (Bowen, 2000, p. 114). As the one that will lead Lois out of the Anglo-Irish nonentity, Marda is quick not to entertain Lois's kind of void-inducing queerness. As a response to Lois's startling remark that she must be "a woman's

woman," Marda is practically dismissive to the point that the conversation is almost comical, answering, "Oh, yes. Where are we going to tennis tomorrow?" (Bowen, 2000, p. 145).

The idea that Marda is to help Lois navigate her identity out of the nonentity that symbolizes the Ascendancy is hinted at right from the beginning of "The Visit of Marda Norton." Trying on Marda's fur coat, the thought comes to Lois: "Oh, the *escape* in other people's clothes!" (Bowen, 2000, p. 109). As she touches the fur gently, "the blurred panes, the steaming changing trees, the lonely cave of the hall no longer ha[s] her consciousness in a clamp. How she could live! she [feels]. She would not need anyone, she would be like an orchestra playing all to itself" (Bowen, 2000, p. 109). One gets the sense that Marda, as a twenty-nine-year-old woman, is well versed in navigating her personal situation. It is true that Marda is bound for marriage with Leslie Lawe, whom she proclaims as "quite rich" (Bowen, 2000, p. 123), and, as she herself desires, bound for bearing children – "I hope I shall have some children: I should hate to be barren" (Bowen, 2000, p. 186). Nevertheless, there hangs this sense that Marda may not be in it because she reveres the institutions but because she might be perspicacious enough to know that being married and a mother is how she could be safe, away from the stagnant Anglo-Irish big houses, which would one day be literally and metaphorically burned down at the end. As Marda secretly breaks the news of her engagement to Hugo, he remarks, "But I thought you didn't believe in this sort of thing?" to which Marda replies, "I? Oh, I never said so" (Bowen, 2000, p. 123). However, as Hugo comes to think of it, he yields that Marda "ha[s] not *explicitly* [emphasis added] said so," which, in a novel so fixated on translating meanings through euphemism and things unsaid, could mean a great deal (Bowen, 2000, p. 123). Even Lois can grasp that Marda's engagement is a contrived move, revealing to Gerald during their break-up, "Even Marda – nothing we said to each other mattered, it hasn't stayed, she goes off to get married in a *mechanical* [emphasis added] sort of way" (Bowen, 2000, p. 281).

Suggesting the psychological impact of Bowen's loss of her mother at the age of thirteen from cancer and the effects of her status as an only child, which often laid a stigma on the parents' selfishness for not procreating, Elizabeth Cullingford (2007), examining Bowen's early fiction, delineates how Bowen opposes traditional gender roles and how motherhood in her works is never fruitful (pp. 278-279). Therefore, that such a modern, disruptive force like Marda Norton should adhere to traditional female roles – "Lois thought how anxious to marry Marda must really be, how anxious not to frighten Leslie away from her" (Bowen, 2000, p. 145) – should be telling enough. With the threat of extinction looming, one has to fight for survival and safety and, in Marda's case, she has found it in such an established and secure entity represented aptly by someone with English nationality. As a result, following the mentioning of Marda's intended, Lois – who in Part One is still completely innocent of the notion of marriage, cluelessly wondering, "Would conversation, in the absence of these prohibitions, cease to interest?" (Bowen, 2000,

p. 10) – proclaims for the first time what she is to reiterate throughout the novel: "I must marry Gerald" (Bowen, 2000, p. 141). Like Marda's engagement, Lois's intention to be Gerald's wife cannot be less "mechanical" or less of an attempt to escape her Anglo-Irish nonentity, since only a fleeting moment before her epiphany – two lines above in the text – it is clear that Lois's erotic, passionate feeling resides in no one other than Marda – "And she hoped that instead of bleaching 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, 2000, p. 104). As Marda has reconciled herself to the idea of her Anglo-Irish identity being compromised, going off to England and marrying an English man, she cannot be less perturbed by the loss of her suitcase, which stands for the embodiment of her identity – a gesture which stands in stark contrast to the older generation who cannot seem to compromise in the same way (Lady Naylor "believe[s] in one good trunk" (Bowen, 2000, p. 109) while "[t]here was something agonising to Sir Richard in the thought of that [missing] suitcase" (Bowen, 2000, p. 112)). Lois, likewise, will learn to forget her suitcase as time progresses – "But she went downstairs, defeated, forgetting her suitcase" (Bowen, 2000, p. 237).

As mentioned earlier, Marda's guidance for maturity for Lois, however, culminates in the ruined mill scene at the end of "The Visit of Marda Norton." The ruined mill, of course, could be reminiscent of the Tullivers' lost Dorlcote Mill in George Elliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), the epitome of the nineteenth-century female bildungsroman. In a way similar to that of the Tullivers' deprivation of the family mill, which has been legally handed over to the Wakems, arguably drives the narrative and thus puts in motion Maggie's coming of age, the ruined mill in *The Last September* is where Lois's rite of passage comes to pass. First of all, the mill symbolizes both the past and the future of Ireland. As a symbol of the past, the mill, as Hugo points out, is "[a]nother ... of our national grievances," a ruined indication of being under the English colonial rule; the architecture "took on all of a past to which it had been given nothing" (Bowen, 2000, p. 179). As a symbol of the future, besides the fact that it houses an IRA member, Hugo, as he is waiting outside the mill while Lois and Marda have gone inside, remarks how the "mill behind affect[s] him like a sense of future" (Bowen, 2000, p. 182). Significantly, it is Marda who hazes Lois to go inside the mill, urging Lois, who is frozen in a void, to reckon with both the past and the future of her country, thus pulling her away from stagnancy, the "particular doom of exclusion." However, this moment of maturity signals more than one kind of growth. Apart from political awakening, the scene also stands for Lois's sexual awakening. The sexual excitement and tension is being built up right from the start as Lois possesses mixed feelings of fear and desire upon seeing the mill – "Lois had to come hurrying up to explain how [the mill] frightened her. In fact, she wouldn't for words go into it but liked going as near as she dared. It was a fear she didn't want to get over, *a kind of deliciousness*" (Bowen, 2000, p. 178). Moreover, the hints that the man's pistol takes on a phallic connotation and that the

three of them may as well be soon engaging in an embarrassing sexual activity are ripe – "They were embarrassed at this curious confrontation. Neither of them had seen a pistol at this angle; it was short-looking, scarcely more than a button. The man sat looking at them with calculating intentness, like a monkey, then got up slowly: the pistol maintained its direction" (Bowen, 2000, p. 181). Tellingly, after having exited the mill, Lois is "surprised to feel her legs trembling under her" (Bowen, 2000, p. 187-188).

In addition, not to mention the blood running from both Marda's lips and knuckles, Marda's censored version of the event – "No, I might have done – *this* – on the broken edge of slate: it will be the edge of a slate, if you don't mind" (Bowen, 2000, p. 184) – serves as a displacement of the act of virile penetration.[1] That this most important interaction between the three is cloaked mostly in ellipsis aligns with the idea that sharing in a sexual activity is something unspeakable that must be kept a secret. Lois, who has just shed her innocence only a moment earlier, therefore needs reassurance from Marda that she will not tell Leslie and that this whole interaction shall remain a "perfect secret" (Bowen, 2000, p. 187). Later in Part Three, reflecting on her relationship with Marda, Lois will go on to emphasize the unspeakable nature of this event: "One had been passingly intimate under the pistol's little acute, pig eye – but one had not spoken of it" (Bowen, 2000, p. 194). However, as unspeakable as the interaction may be, it is clear that through this experience Lois has figuratively established and completed her void identity right after she has come out of the mill. First of all, Lois, who has earlier dismissed the importance of time telling, now feels enough in tune with history to challenge Hugo's "old conceptions," resisting him when he accuses her of residing in nonentity, telling her, "*You* deserve to be shot! ... You don't seem to see, you seem to have no conception" (Bowen, 2000, p. 184).[2] Indeed, signaling that she has pulled her identity out of the void that comes with the haunting possibility of not having been born at all, Lois proclaims, "I'm glad [Hugo] wasn't my father" (Bowen, 2000, p. 186). Moreover, after settling the notion that they are not sorry they have gone in, Marda remarks, "One won't be *girlish* [emphasis added] again"

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[1] Corcoran (2001) points out that Julian Moynahan has associated Marda's bleeding, aptly in a gothic scene, with "a vampiric touch" (p. 327). This therefore infuses the event even further with sexual connotation as, for example, in Bram Stoker's quintessential text about vampirism, *Dracula* (1897), vampiric creatures are portrayed as promiscuous and sexually forward and deviant.

[2] Matthew Brown (2012) reads Hugo's furious remark in a way that further heightens the sexual tension in this scene. That Hugo thinks Lois and not Marda should be shot points to "his erotic longing for Marda and his barely concealed dislike of Lois, whose mother Laura he had fallen in love with but who did not return his affection: hence his distaste for laurel leaves throughout the novel" (p. 19).

(Bowen, 2000, p. 185). Being pulled back into the developmental paradigm, in which she was not at the beginning, Lois is therefore made to come to terms with the situation of her class, realizing that she cannot keep staying at Danielstown if she is to escape extinction – " 'You know,' she said, 'all this has quite stopped any excitement for me about the mill. It's a loss, really. I don't think I will come down this part of the river again' " (Bowen, 2000, p. 187).

Following Lois's figurative awakening during the mill scene, we can concretely witness Lois's growth in "The Departure of Gerald." Being told by Francie of Mrs. Montmorency's interference in her prospective marriage with Gerald, which later results in their break-up, Lois realizes that she is deprived of the opportunity to escape her nonentity by way of being married to an established entity such as an English man, lamenting how "[a]t least Gerald is definite. ... At least it [love] might get one somewhere" (Bowen, 2000, p. 275). Also, Lois realizes that her existence has been toyed with throughout; intently kept in limbo – "If I learn German, they say, why not Italian? And when I learn Italian they take no interest" (Bowen, 2000, p. 275). However, amidst her realization, we see Lois announce her arrival at adulthood, at a new, established identity – "Impressed by strangeness, by this pressure of emergency, Lois plaited her hair in two plaits instead of one and felt herself a different woman" (Bowen, 2000, p. 274) – "She could feel the bright girl she had been for Mrs. Montmorency disintegrate: much that even she had taken to be herself went with the illusion" (Bowen, 2000, p. 275). Nevertheless, one could put forth a speculation that, despite her announcement of coming of age, the mature Lois is still forced into a state of perpetual adolescence, being sent by the Naylors to learn French – "I [Myra] never have been happy about her French. As I said to her, there will be plenty of time for Italian" (Bowen, 2000, pp. 300-301). Indeed, even the more forceful and experienced Marda cannot avoid the fate Lois is subject to; she herself is aware of how, as a wife and a future mother, she is to be entirely under Leslie's influence – "She expected, some forty-eight hours ahead, to be walking with [Leslie] in a clipped and traditional garden, in Kentish light. ... So much of herself that was fluid must, too, be moulded by his idea of her. Essentials were fixed and localised by her being with him – to become as the bricks and wallpaper of a home" (Bowen, 2000, p. 187). Yet, the implication is that what matters is that they, the future of the Ascendancy, live on, having succeeded in escaping from the nonentity enclosing Danielstown, the moment where the house and all that it emblematizes is burned down in the end. Julia M. Williams (1995) points out that the burning of the big houses at the conclusion of the novel is ironically an act of preservation, allowing the Ascendancy to be temporarily eclipsed and revising their position – "The final pages of *The Last September* endeavor to transform the symbolic content of the big house, showing that wood and plaster of real houses was the necessary step in the modification of the Ascendancy from the colonials into fellow nationals" (p. 237). Recounting the story of a girl who struggles and fights to break away from the doom of exclusion, *The*

Last September is therefore, in one way, a novel about life's vicissitude, growing up, adapting and surviving.

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