
A “Pre-Natal Hold”: Elizabeth Bowen, Mothers and Daughters

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Abstract. This article argues that, faced with the disintegration of their patriarchal Ascendancy culture, Elizabeth Bowen’s young Anglo-Irish female protagonists in *The Last September* (1929) and *A World of Love* (1954) revert to the primordial mother-daughter relationship as an attempt to foster some sense of identity and stability. In *The Last September*, the flux and tumult of the War for Independence prompts Lois’s pursuit of maternal unity with her absent mother, Laura. This endeavour is ultimately frustrated, leaving Lois with an unstable sense of self facing an even less stable future as the Ascendancy and her projected lifestyle crumbles. For Jane in *A World of Love*, the posthumous affair with her mother’s dead lover, Guy, is a misdirected attempt to gain closeness with her mother. Before, the mother-daughter relationship had been tethered to an unproductive past by Guy’s memory, and only with the destruction of his memory can the future be secured.

Key Words. Elizabeth Bowen, Anglo-Irish, Mothers, Daughters, Family, Relationships, the Past.

Resumen. Este artículo parte de la base de que, ante la desintegración de la cultura patriarcal de la Ascendencia protestante, las jóvenes protagonistas anglo-irlandesas en dos novelas de Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (1929) y *A World of Love* (1954), vuelven a la relación primordial entre madre e hija en un intento por desarrollar su propia independencia y estabilidad personal. En *The Last September*, el devenir y la confusión resultante de la Guerra de la Independencia empuja a Lois a acercarse de alguna forma a la figura de su madre ausente, Laura. Este esfuerzo se verá frustrado, provocando en Lois una gran inestabilidad emocional, la cual se verá acrecentada por el futuro incierto que supone el desmoronamiento del estilo de vida de la Ascendencia protestante. Jane, por su parte, la protagonista de *A World of Love*, intenta una relación póstuma con el amante de su madre, Guy, como una forma de acercarse más a ella. Previamente la relación entre madre e hija había estado sujeta a serios impedimentos debido al recuerdo de Guy, y sólo con la destrucción de este recuerdo la relación podrá reconstruirse en el futuro.

Palabras clave. Elizabeth Bowen, anglo-irlandés, madres, hijas, familia, relaciones, el

pasado.

In a tribute to Elizabeth Bowen at the Farahy addresses, her cousin, Martin Mansergh, recalls that “many families, my own included, had an idiosyncratic patriarch, who dominated family life for most of the nineteenth century, and who did much to determine the fortunes of the family through a time of tremendous transition” (41). This patriarchal aspect to Ascendancy culture identified by Mansergh is borne out in Bowen’s family history, *Bowen’s Court* (BC) – throughout, Bowen refers to her familial patriarchs as a type of dynasty (Henry I – IV), evincing deference to the tradition of male inheritance and dominance. Contrastingly, the mothers of Bowen’s family are more difficult to locate historically, and, as Heather Laird notes, Bowen labels the chapter of *Bowen’s Court* dealing with her own experience “Afterword”, rather than “Elizabeth I” (201). Indeed, in the “Afterword”, Bowen writes “already I have changed my father’s name for my husband’s”, implicitly placing herself in the category of other female Bowens who were unfit to inherit, many of whom “left little trace” on the family history (BC 448; 77-8). In this sense, Bowen’s conjecture that the Ascendancy was “motherless” perhaps refers to the omission of mothers – and women more generally – from the mainstream, patriarchal historical narrative of Anglo-Ireland (BC 385). The outline for Bowen’s unfinished autobiography continues this idea of historic exclusion, with Bowen claiming that she “arrived, young, into a different mythology – one totally alien to that of [her] forefathers”. Indeed, that Bowen labels her own “mythology [that] of [an] ‘otherland’” upholds an idea of alterity which further serves to highlight the archived, “other” myth of the Ascendancy mother as against the dominant, patriarchal heritage of the Ascendancy itself (Bowen, *Pictures and Conversations* 276).

While Bowen’s historical writing on the Ascendancy thus exhibits a clear sense of female erasure, critics such as Ann Owens Weekes and Margot Gayle Backus have noted the corresponding trope of self-sacrifice often applied to Ascendancy daughters in Anglo-Irish fiction (*Irish Women Writers; The Gothic Family Romance*). The already ambivalent role of the Ascendancy female became increasingly unstable in the twentieth century. Although fiction such as *The Last September* (LS) portrays an Ascendancy in utter denial of this fact, the disintegration of the Anglo-Irish tradition was manifestly inevitable from the early years of the 1900s. In a 1951 essay, “The Cult of Nostalgia”, Bowen recalls the destruction of large swathes of London during the Blitz. Her expression of desire for a stronghold in the face of wartime ruination speaks to the crumbling Ascendancy in the twentieth century, when ancestral houses were razed to the ground and their inhabitants left in something of an existential limbo. Bowen’s plea, “our emotions seek something stable to cling to. How can we not seek, in some form, an abiding city? We continue to cry out for ... protecting walls around the soul”, displays a need for permanence in the face of rapidly evaporating certainty (qtd. in Linett 71). This sense of Ascendancy history and inheritance being under threat through the demolition of its landmarks, coupled with the fear of an unviable or non-existent future without this history, is certainly present throughout Bowen’s Irish-based fiction. In *The Last September* and *A World of Love* (AWL), the same craving for permanence, for “protecting walls around the soul”, assumes a relational form.

That is, while *A World of Love* and *The Last September* bear out Bowen’s *Court*’s warning that “we have everything to dread from the dispossessed”, the characters in both novels are not so much geographically deracinated as relationally dislocated (BC 455). Throughout both *The Last September* and *A World of Love*, historical and familial dispossession destabilises the novels’ female protagonists, kindling a deep desire for permanence which is particularly evident in patterns of mother-daughter displacement. Amidst the unmooring of the conventional patriarchal paths historically set for them, Bowen’s

young women seek an earlier, more primordial sense of stability, gleaned from the mother. As such, Bowen's call, in "The Cult of Nostalgia", for "protective walls around the soul" is a multi-faceted appeal. On an obvious level, it expresses yearning for the security of the Ascendancy homes with which the Anglo-Irish long-bolstered themselves against an "unloving country, the unwilling bosom whereon [these houses were] set" (LS 66). However, in the same way that these "house[s] became a magnet for [Ascendancy] dependence", the mother is an indispensable, if marginalised, part of Bowen's exploration of the Ascendancy, and the need for cloistered, protective walls is deeply evocative of womb nostalgia and the mother-bond (LS 67). For Bowen's fictional Ascendancy women, the continuation of a patriarchal Ascendancy legacy jars with the de facto disintegration of Anglo-Ireland; for Lois and Jane, reliance on a barren past destabilises the future, and the realisation of the past's patriarchal infertility prompts the search for the "other myth" of maternal unity. While, in *The Last September*, Lois is left somewhat trapped, separated by history from her mother and with no clear path to the future, *A World of Love* has a more positive conclusion, with Jane stepping forward into the future, having both gained a meaningful maternal relationship and jilted the patriarchal oppression of history.

The Last September

The omission of Anglo-Irish maternal figures from the Ascendancy narrative noted in *Bowen's Court* is heightened by the macabre strain of dying mothers throughout – Bowen's own mother died young, as did others, including the mother of Henry III, builder of Bowen's Court. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that *The Last September* is haunted by the absence of a seminal figure; while, in *A World of Love*, Lilia scoffs, "I should hardly call us a family", Lois attests that "we have no family life" (LS 88). Neil Corcoran has aptly noted that this early novel is replete with the holes, lacunae and ellipses that would come to characterise Bowen's style, and such gaps are nowhere clearer than in the conspicuous absence of the mother (315). Several critics have highlighted the centrality of the mother-question to Irish women's fiction more generally, specifically arguing that Bowen's mothers literally or figuratively abandon their daughters. Anne Fogarty, for instance, notes the tendency to tether the mother with the trauma of a past "that can be neither buried nor resolved". According to Fogarty, the mother may symbolise a blockade against her daughter's attempt to salvage identity in the face of "an overwhelming sense of illegitimacy and disempowerment" (89). Similarly, Adalgisa Giorgio explores the idea that matrophobia and the fear of becoming one's mother can lead to textual matricide, or to mother-quest (the daughter's search for herself through maternal recuperation). Giorgio outlines how, amid the loosening of monolithic tenets of identity, disorientation can precipitate the retreat into antediluvian forms of belonging (3-5). That is, when the foundation for hitherto existence crumbles, a daughter can often revert to the mother for a stable identity, a process with potential to result in profound pathological cathexis.

This is clearly at work in *The Last September*: at a time when Ascendancy life decayed, and the erstwhile didactic, inflexible measures of female identity were thrown into flux, the novel sees the young female protagonist, Lois, respond by seeking unity with her mother, an endeavour which is ultimately frustrated. *The Last September* combines Giorgio's theories of textual matricide and mother-quest, as it is the mother's death which leads to Lois's unfamiliarity with Laura and, consequently, with herself, and which prompts her resultant mother-quest. As is clear in both *The Last September* and *A World of Love*, women are, to a large extent, shaped by their interactions with the mother, but Lois is unable to relate to and model herself on her mother due to Laura's absence – deprived of a mother-model, Lois is unable to establish a sense of subjectivity as pitted against the "other" of the mother figure. However, Lois is seemingly cognisant that this elusive sense of subjectivity is

somehow connected to Laura, and, in her pursuit of identity, she is subconsciously drawn to iterations of her mother.

Pregnancy comprises an erasure of the boundary between self and other, and, hence, is the most profound point of unity between mother and daughter. Over the course of *The Last September*, there are suggestions that Lois conflates the maternal and the uterine – throughout, womblike motifs intimate her desire to be pre-born (Linett 72). This concept of reversion to the womb is most obviously intimated in the moments in which Lois hides, or finds herself ensconced, in laurels, which serve as both a symbolic gesture to, and physical reminder of, Laura. In the scene in which Lois observes the IRA member from within the laurel bushes, she experiences a feeling of claustrophobia and discomfort. Enveloped by her mother's namesake, a fear of the laurels escalates into a "fear before her birth", which she links to her mother: "fear like the earliest germ of her life that had stirred in Laura" (*LS* 33). Evidently, Lois is highly ambivalent – being encircled by laurels is the symbolic equivalent of being in Laura's womb, and this evokes "fear". When she urges herself to "force a pass", it is as though Lois wishes to exit the cloistered confinement of the laurels/womb and be born, "[going] forward eagerly". However, she demurs from this option due to a sense of absence: she views her life as "deprived" (*LS* 33). Thus, this lack, associated with Laura, bids Lois defy her compulsion to sally forth: she opts to remain in the laurels, attached to her mother, in order to remedy her "depriv[ation]". This resolution is compounded by the comfort Lois subsequently takes in the uterine image of the family "in the shuttered-in drawing room ... sealed in" (*LS* 33).

This laurel/womb motif resurfaces in a later scene in which Gerald kisses Lois. Standing on the path, Lois falls back into the laurels, as though seeking shelter from his advances, and the laurels creak as if in protest. Gerald's robust masculinity is an obvious intrusion into the feminine sphere of Lois's womb-connection, as evinced by the idea that "her physical apprehension of [Gerald] was confused by the slipping, cold leaves" (*LS* 172). This kiss comes after an earlier one, in which Lois's sense of deprivation arises again, making her "lonely". Her reaction to this second interaction warrants examination. Having been kissed, she closes her eyes, plunging herself into darkness, imagines being at sea, and wishes she was "enclosed in non-entity, in some ideal no-place" (*LS* 89). Here, the darkness corresponds to uterine blackness – in blinding herself to intrusions from the external world, Lois cushions herself in the place most resembling the ultimate internal space, the womb. Moreover, the feeling of being at sea, on the crossing from "Holyhead [to] Kingstown", is, firstly, attuned to the liminality of the transition from pre-birth to life, and, secondly, evocative of the amniotic fluid which separates the womb-interred foetus from external life (*LS* 89). Similarly, Lois's normal haunt in Danielstown is the symbolically uterine anteroom (*LS* 9). Thus, Lois seeks transitional places and yearns for liminal existence, as demonstrated by the anteroom, her reluctance to commit to physical exchanges, and her aptitude for detachment. In seeking a "no-place", Lois wishes to suspend existence as a clutch at security; tellingly, for her, this comprises a return to the womb, never to have been born but to remain fused with her mother.

Besides seeking to become in-uterine, Lois seeks unity with Laura by evading definition. According to Jacques Lacan's theory of identity formation, a child's entrance into the patriarchal system of language comes at the expense of the mother. Because language is mediated in favour of men, mothers are repressed through the utterance of her child's "I" (Giorgio 14). That is, when a daughter, who has erstwhile been taught to derive positive identity from her mother, establishes an individual identity, it is necessarily based on a patriarchal sense of subjectivity and independence as opposed to a maternal sense of unity and interdependence. In resisting definition, Lois eschews the effacement of her mother, retains her umbilical attachment to her, and avoids condemning Laura to the role of m-other against

which to draw a personal, independent sense of subjectivity. This is clearly indicated in the scene in which Myra and Francie discuss Lois outside her bedroom. Lois endeavours to ignore them,

[b]ut from the room behind the other voices, flooding in through the door, came after her. She flung herself on her bed with a squawk from the springs and pressed her ear shut till the lobes and her finger-tips ached: also she pulled the pillows over her head. It was hot thus and still the voices penetrated ... it was hard, really, the way they both kept at it (*LS* 60).

Lois's situation in the bed, coupled with the sexually charged language, suggests a sexually violent, rapacious aspect to the threat of epistemological revelation. Therefore, if definition is sexual, akin to male penetration, Lois's reticence in hearing what she "is" is deference to Laura – as Lois continues as an undefined entity, she is not separated from her mother. The scene is, furthermore, punctuated with juxtapositions of interiority and exteriority, again recalling the womb motif. For instance, Francie feels like "something being put back in its box" when Myra reprimands her. Lois is trapped inside her room, which is under attack of "penetrat[ion]", and has "not the face to come out" (*LS* 60). Therefore, Lois doubly connects to the womb in literally remaining inside, and in interrupting Myra and Francie's discussion of her before she is defined and semantically separated from Laura. Indeed, being defined in tantamount to extinction for Lois: "knowledge of this would stop, seal, finish one" (*LS* 60). Tellingly, precisely the same terms are later employed pertaining to love: "doesn't love kind of finish people off?" (*LS* 72). As such, love and definition are conflated within a patriarchal system which seals woman within her role as wife and mother.

Although Lois seeks to regain her mother, she does not necessarily wish to *become* her mother. The pressing feeling, in *A World of Love*, that Jane morphs into her mother Lilia, recreating her youthful good looks and appropriating her claim on the hearts of Guy and Fred, is also pronounced in *The Last September*. From the first, Lois is physically compared to her mother: not only does she resemble her, but Lois is "a shade or two nearer than Laura, perhaps, to the accuracy passing for beauty" (*LS* 63). If women proverbially *become* their mothers, Lois's transition is precipitated by Laura's absence. Just as Lilia's projected life ended when she most resembled Jane, Lois is now, in age and appearance, nearing comparison with Laura. Thus, there is a danger that Lois will simply be substituted for Laura; there is the unspoken expectation that Lois will, ultimately, become a version of Laura in accepting her childbearing role as an Ascendancy female. Indeed, while Jane's affair with Guy is "familiar" for having already been conducted with Jane's mother, Lois entertains a flirtation with Hugo, a former flame of Laura's. However, Lois's vague attraction to Hugo has more to do with gaining closeness to some version of her mother than with desire for Hugo himself. Moreover, given Lois's awareness of Laura's fear regarding childbirth and pregnancy ("fear like the earliest germ of life had stirred in Laura"), there is an argument to be made that she subconsciously fears the masculine: while she is being propelled into comparison, rather than unity, with Laura, she might at least avoid the conclusive "sealing off" brought about by heterosexual love. Indeed, she muses that "love was the mainspring of woman's grievances. Illnesses all arose from it, the having of children" (*LS* 60). This concern regarding love is perhaps somewhat euphemistic – if the epicentre of the anxiety surrounding love is the having of children, then what is really feared is male intervention. Accordingly, in *The Last September*, there is a tacit but nonetheless marked anxiety at the thought of violation by the Ascendancy male. Male sexuality is directly connected, and set up in opposition, to maternal absence when Lois ruminates that the patriarchal Big House highlights her sense of maternal absence, of being "deprived": "she and these home surroundings further penetrated each other

mutually in the discovery of a lack” (*LS* 33; 116). Here, Lois is aware of the link between male sexuality (“penetration”) and the mother connection (the “lack”). Moreover, she knows that, although heterosexuality could be a temporary solution for her prevailing affliction by this lack, it would ultimately fail to satisfy or fulfil her. Hence, she is subconsciously attracted to womb symbols whenever she is confronted by displays of male sexuality.

Of course, female love is one step closer to maternal unity than heterosexuality, and, accordingly, there are multifarious latent hints at lesbianism throughout. Lois’s infatuation with Marda and her apparent desire to impress her friend, Viola, are suggestive of a homosexual proclivity. Certain feminist critics, such as H  l  ne Cixous, have postulated that female writing is akin to masturbation, in that both are done in private and imbued with a sense of shame (“The Laugh of the Medusa”). Hence, Lois’s vaguely sexually-charged letters to Viola, her glamorous schoolmate, could be conceived as sublimated, scantily concealed homosexual urges. Indeed, when Gerald speaks of love to Lois, her initial thought is how she will recapture and frame the event in her letter to Viola – it is only because of Viola’s adult interactions with men that Lois wonders “whether life was to hold her, too, a man’s passion; and if so, when?” Viola writes primarily of her flirtations with men, but she is not beholden to them: “Viola flashed her men off in a phrase” (*LS* 51). While Lois matches her subject matter, supplying Viola with the romantic details she demands to know, she is, unlike Viola, stunted in voicing the particulars of her feelings towards the soldiers to whom she alludes. Indeed, her correspondence becomes clear and cogent only due to Gerald’s interjection, which lends certainty. Therefore, although her letters originate in Lois’s vaguely transgressive desire for Viola, they mostly comprise conventional, suitably girlish, descriptions of soldiers. This demonstrates the impracticality and unfeasibility of lesbian love, and accentuates the need for masculine intervention, just as, in *A World of Love*, Jane’s engagement with letters facilitates her flirtation with sexuality vicariously, through the medium of a man. Ultimately, Viola distances herself from Lois by assuming the role of a heterosexual facilitator and thereby clearly conveying her disinterest in Lois: that she writes “in a married-womanish tone of encouragement” demonstrates that Lois’s covert lesbianism will not be entertained (*LS* 51). This, coupled with Marda’s abandonment of her own autonomy in favour of a traditional, patriarchal marriage, leads to Lois’s disillusionment with female love as a substitute for closeness with Laura. Therefore, Lois’s determination that she “hate[s] women ... but I can’t think of how to be anything else” is a heartfelt cry of disappointed hope, and the ultimate realisation that she is doomed to frustration (*LS* 122).

When Lois discerns the unviability of female relationships, she determines to marry Gerald. Although Gerald is not as effective a means of maternal synthesis as relationship with Marda or a similar representation of the mother-figure, Lois nonetheless seeks Laura through him. In endeavouring to vocalise her ambivalence towards Gerald, she obliquely draws on the same lexicon which denotes her mother-quest; thus, Lois’s desire for heterosexual normativity is at once fed, and thwarted, by her lack of a mother. Her lamentation that “she would have loved to have loved him; she felt some kind of wistfulness, some *deprivation*” recalls, once again, the language of absence which has been consistently associated with Laura, suggesting that Lois’s attraction to Gerald arises from this maternal penury, and that her foundational, unrealized craving is for a mother (*LS* 52 emphasis mine). However, because her search for subjectivity through the mother-prism has been disappointed, Lois begins to succumb to Gerald’s jovial patriarchy, surrendering her own subjectivity by submitting to his: “if this is so perfect to anyone, can one be wrong?” (*LS* 163). On the one hand, her body recoils at the idea of physical possession and being “sealed” as her mother was; on the other, “not to be known seemed like doom: extinction” (*LS* 34). However, to be known by the patriarchal Ascendancy system is also annihilation – when Lois defies Myra and Francie’s definition, she

feels that being defined, being known, is tantamount to extinction, as it would sound the death knell for her affinity with Laura.

Similarly, her reliance on Gerald means that the establishment of an authentic female subjectivity is virtually impossible. When Lois cogitates on her lack of power to influence Gerald's perception of her, she betrays the knowledge that relationship with him would constitute the surrendering of her selfhood: "some idea he had formed of herself remained inaccessible to her; she could not affect it" (*LS* 48). This notion of compromised selfhood is furthered in the spatial implications of Lois's rumination, which convey a feeling of ejection. The idea that Gerald holds the kernel of Lois's being suggests that he has invaded her to the extent that she is evicted from herself, and supplanted. The interior comfort implicit in the spatial planes of Laura's womb is replaced by an unsettling sense of displacement: Lois is external to Gerald's impression of her, which is interiorized, internalised, but inaccessible to her. Thus, not only does forced integration into a patriarchal society, through Lacan's "I", expel her from the womb and sever her primordial connection with her mother, but this same integration appropriates her very being, requiring that she is removed from herself, and thus depriving her of subjectivity.

Lois's mother-quest ultimately ends in failure. Her search for subjectivity concludes with the rather dejected assumption that Lois has failed to overcome the vacuous inertia stultifying her being, and that she will regain her mother through the means which castrated her agency – although Gerald dies, it is assumed that Lois has resigned herself to her role in the patriarchy. In this sense, while Laura is placed in a "kind of design of which she was wholly unaware", Lois's concurrent wish to be "related" and in a "pattern" connects her to her mother, but also places her within the patriarchal system which oppresses her (*LS* 64). Ultimately, when Lois expresses this need to be related, she does not regain Laura herself but rather the role to which both she and Laura are predestined. In both Marda's assurance that she will make a good mother and wife, and in Laurence's taunt that she is a "little mother", Lois does not gain Laura, but becomes another generic Ascendancy woman (*LS* 98; 188). The only means by which Lois will locate ideological proximity to her is through motherhood, the ultimate emulation. Lois's genesis as a gestating fear in Laura's womb is, in a roundabout manner, regained through Lois's conception of another such embryonic being and the resultant empathy with Laura – a submission which is evidently as much a cause of anxiety to Lois as it was "fear" to Laura.

A World of Love

A World of Love examines Bowen's own conjecture that one does not "enter" the past – one is, rather, "entered by it" (qtd. in Lee 199). The novel details such a possession of the Anglo-Irish Danby family by their recent familial history. The characters of the novel straddle two states: at once unable to move forward into a new era, and afraid that they invest too much in a crumbling past, they are doomed to liminal, unfulfilled existence (Seward 33-4). Following the death of the spectral inheritor of the family house, the Danbys are haunted by Guy's presence in Montefort. Refusing to fully let him die, they "conceived of no death, least of all [the] death-in-life" to which they submit themselves in slavish dedication to his memory (*AWL* 78). The family is caught in a hopeless cycle of lost loves with lost people, and, in this sense, their familial shackles to history echo those of the Anglo-Irish more broadly, mirroring the lost potential of the Ascendancy itself. When Fred refers to the strength of Guy and Antonia's bond, his claim that "the way you two were, you could've run the world" also serves to highlight the bathos of Anglo-Ireland (*AWL* 82). However, the discovery of a bundle of love-letters composed by Guy blasts open the past. Their discovery renders Antonia and Lilia's existences somewhat redundant, as they invalidate the memories to which they

dedicated their lives; only in extinguishing familial links to the past can they pave the way for the future.

Even preceding the novel's timeframe, the family dynamic is fluid and chaotic: the one former owner of Montefort referenced "married the cook ... went queer in the head from drinking and thinking about himself too much, left no children – anyway, no legit's" (AWL 136-7). Thus, *A World of Love* presents a parody of the Ascendancy obsession with pure, continued lineage: Guy was Lilia's fiancé, Antonia's first-cousin and first love, and Fred is his illegitimate cousin. Fred, of dubious heritage himself, becomes the substitute for Guy, who is "familiar" in Maud's imaginary companion, Gay, and Antonia counts the number of times she and Fred might have been lovers (AWL 17-9; 76). Lilia and Fred are married, enveloped in a "sultry, overintensified" atmosphere, but sleep at opposite ends of Montefort (AWL 18; 32). Fred harbours an uncomfortable attraction to Jane, and a family and personality resemblance is pointed out between Guy and Antonia, who takes Jane as her protégée (Wills 139). These tangled family connections bring about the unmooring of familial stability, culminating in Lilia's bizarre statement to Maud: "I should hardly call us a family" (AWL 50). Such labyrinthine familial permutations also arise in *The Last September*: Laurence's hypothesis that Laura should have married Hugo rather than Lois's father (meaning that Lois would never have been born in the first place) somewhat undercuts Lois's mother-quest. Jane's relationship with her mother is similarly complicated – it is implied that they never enjoyed a close bond. Indeed, Lilia seems rather indifferent to Jane, admitting, "I daresay I could have been a more loving mother" (AWL 50). Moreover, Antonia surmises that Lilia used her pregnancy with Jane as an excuse to lord it over her, but later refused to accept Jane's existence as a reason to go back to Fred (AWL 18; 93). For her own part, Antonia relishes Jane's devotion to her as it serves to humiliate Lilia's status as the mother of the house. Thus, while Lilia and Jane's relationship is rendered utterly dysfunctional by Jane's bond with Guy, Lilia's ex-fiancé, the precedent for children being used as pawns to gain influence in family politics already exists in the mother-daughter relationship. Indeed, the involvement between Guy and Jane is arguably a spectral extension of what is, at best, maternal myopia, at worst, motherly manipulation, and, ultimately, maternal repression.

In his influential essay, "The Uncanny", Sigmund Freud outlines the *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich*. He splits the unheimlich/uncanny into two categories, the first comprising something unknown, and the second referring to some knowledge which should be concealed but has emerged. Freud elaborates that the uncanny is not alien, but is something familiar which has been repressed in the mind; thus, it ought to have remained hidden but has come to light (241). This idea of the uncanny extends to Bowen's treatment of the past, which is at once known, because Lilia and Antonia daily relive it, and unknown, because their relationships with Guy, on which that past is based, were stillborn. Moreover, the truth of the past (that Guy was unfaithful to both) which should have remained hidden in order for their lives to continue, is revealed through the letters. Guy's reappearance is, furthermore, uncanny because Lilia and Antonia tacitly repressed their knowledge of his infidelity, and the resurfacing of Guy's letters disrupts their mutual repression. As such, Sinéad Mooney's claim that Bowen's characters are haunted by the "impersonal forces of history" should perhaps be qualified (91) – in *A World of Love*, history is so haunting precisely because it is personal. The uncanny aspect of Guy's resurrection is compounded by his communion with Jane. Possessed by Guy, Jane becomes familiar in two senses. Firstly, she forces hidden memories and the repressed cathexis centred on Guy to the surface in essentially becoming his doppelgänger. Because Guy's life was cut short by his premature death, he inhabits Montefort and invades Jane to carry out a proxy life. The extent to which the memory of Guy has been repressed at Montefort is evinced by the fact that Antonia does not seem surprised by his resurgence. She insinuates her repressed, hidden knowledge of this inevitability in her musing

that it was “unlike him to be dead” – to her, Guy’s reappearance merely serves to confirm the inkling that “there *was* more to come” (AWL 44-5).

Secondly, and more compellingly, Jane’s resemblance to Lilia becomes uncanny. In forming an attachment to Guy, Jane effectively assumes the role of her own mother’s doppelgänger, becoming the apathetic Lilia’s double. Indeed, the young Lilia, as she would have been on the eve of her marriage and on the cusp of her life with Guy, is described in the same terms as Jane: golden-haired and willowy (AWL 14). In a sense, while Guy’s life was curtailed, the life promised to Lilia was similarly culled by his death. There are two aspects to this interpretation. Firstly, Lilia, for want of a better option, merely continued to exist in the wake of her loss, but dedicated her life-force to Guy’s memory and the ghost of her life with him. This leads to the idea that, secondly, there exists, on some atemporal plane, an alternative life that would, or should, have been Lilia’s – she wistfully cogitates on this “otherwise, [this] alternative” (AWL 54). Just as Lois’s resemblance to Laura exacerbates the expectation that she will continue her mother’s curtailed role as Ascendancy woman, Jane, in closely resembling Lilia at the moment when her “true” life was snatched from her, is pinioned into this “alternative” role which never truly existed. Thus, in affording Lilia the life to which she dedicated herself, and which was denied her upon Guy’s death, Jane becomes Lilia’s doppelgänger.

This doubling is borne out in the synchronistic trope of repressed sexuality in mother and daughter. Typically, in the gothic, female spiritual copulation with ghosts is a redress for frustration at insufficient human males (Mooney 93). Indeed, Guy is implicitly presented as a romantic, sexually potent figure. His masculine name, in conjunction with the phallic obelisk which, in commemorating an unnamed family member might as well commemorate him, creates the idea that the women of the novel are possessed by him sexually. Moreover, it is hard to separate Lilia’s fantasies about him from the sexual consummation of the young virgin and the war hero that never happened. This intense sexual frustration is borne out in Lilia’s musing that “death made him seem a defaulter, a runner-out upon his unconsummated loves. He had stirred up too much ... He had not finished with them ... His immortality was in their longings” (AWL 97). Here, the sense of inconclusion, and the idea that Guy had defaulted, implies a yearning for his return, insinuating a desire to somehow channel him. Death, it seems, is insufficient justification for Guy not to be present; simply put, his relationship with the living, and its overtly sexual nature, was not “finished”, and Lilia wishes for it to be resumed.

In her study of the development of female sexuality through the mother-daughter bond, Nancy Chodorow outlines the process by which mothers can use their daughters to fulfil their disappointed sexual desires. Detailing the idea of “false empathy”, Chodorow describes mothers projecting their repressed desires on to their daughters, and reacting sympathetically to needs which are, in fact, their own (100). In application to Bowen, Jane’s entanglement with Guy could be the result of Lilia’s repressed longings, somehow sublimated and passed on to her daughter. This is, of course, problematic for several reasons, not least the fact that Guy is generally, if tacitly, acknowledged to be Jane’s “real” father, despite having been dead at the time of her conception; as such, Jane’s relationship with him is not only spectrophilic, but also borders on incestuous. In this way, Jane certainly corresponds to Chodorow’s description of victims of what she calls the frustrated mother’s “autoerotic gratification ... by identifying vicariously with their [daughters’] sexuality” (101). Indeed, throughout the text, there are several instances in which Jane’s communing with Guy and Lilia’s fantasising about him coincide. For example, Lilia and Jane collide metaphysically in the scene in which Jane awaits the re-enactment of history in the woods. The feeling that she is being effaced by the past is intimated in her “scented oblivion” as she rhapsodises: “the particular secret of the place where [she] lay was that it was pre-inhabited. An ardent hour of

summer had gone by here – yes, *here*, literally where she was, to her certain knowledge. Evidence was in the breast of her dress, the letter” (AWL 47-8). To Jane, the landscape is at once a “vision” and something that was “still before her” – the notion of something being the way it was before confirms that Jane is morphing into another person in another time. Simultaneously, Lilia is confronted with “sorrow ... like an apparition”, connecting the two symbiotically (AWL 50). Thus, there is a strong case to be made that Jane is an embodiment of Chodorow’s repressed mother, acting on the impetus that Lilia either refuses to recognise or denies.

Their concurrence means that both Lilia and Jane are endangered by Guy’s reappearance, a fact exhibited at the dinner party scene. Jane’s “odd bridal Ascendancy” likens her to Lilia as a young woman, engaged to Guy (AWL 67). However, just at the point when Guy is most palpably present, returning to complete his marriage to Lilia as mediated through the bridal Jane, he threatens both of their existences: “She must hope never in all her life again to be so aware of him, or indeed of anyone – for this was becoming so much too much for Jane, so giddy as to be within an iota of being nothing. The annihilation-point of sensation came into view, as something she was beginning to long to reach” (AWL 69). The ominous sense of threat here is not least due to the claustrophobic saturation between Jane and Guy. The conditions of their concurrence seem to necessarily involve Jane’s effacement – she is pushed towards nihilism. Thus, Jane, and the representation of Lilia she embodies, is enticed to the precipice between life and death, and tempted to jump that Guy might be resurrected. As such, Bowen’s narrative sympathy for ghosts is perhaps easily misinterpreted: “When of love there is enough to go around, inevitably it is the dead who must do without ... Their continuous dying while we live, their repeated deaths as each of us die who knew them, are not in nature to be withstood. Obstinate rememberers of the dead seem to queer themselves ... in part they come to share the dead’s isolation” (AWL 44).

Rather than pitying Guy, Bowen perhaps refers to Lilia who, in living posthumously, embodies the very “continuous dying while we live” alluded to – Lilia, more than Guy, dies “repeated[ly]”. Indeed, Antonia highlights the sacrificial nature of Lilia’s life, pointing out that she “went too far – letting [Guy] waste your life” (AWL 125). Thus, history in *A World of Love* is fundamentally patriarchal and its endurance into the present relies on the self-inflicted erasure of the family’s women – Lilia, Antonia, and then Jane.

Indeed, just as the past works to displace the present in the novel, it comes perilously close to displacing Lilia. She is in Montefort because she was to marry a man who died, and who was unfaithful to her prior to the fact. Fred says that he took a chance on Lilia, thinking “there ought to be something in Guy’s girl”. His conclusion, “not for me, never for me”, paired with the realisation of Guy’s non-committal nonchalance, confronts Lilia with her ultimate obsolescence (AWL 104). Thus, the sexual taboos at Montefort are compromised by Guy’s letters, implicating, as Maud Ellmann notes, “all the characters in an unconscious orgy with the dead” (185). It is, however, on the verge of complete familial and personal disintegration that the family are drawn together in relinquishing their grasp on the past. When Fred gives Lilia the letters, Jane rounds the corner, and, despite previous misgivings about her parentage, she “with a start ... perceived [them] to be her father and mother” (AWL 104). Thereafter, Maud’s cursing, “let his children be fatherless and his wife a widow”, is silenced by Antonia, and Jane burns the letters (AWL 104).

The overarching conflict of the novel is between finding stability in the past and realising that this past is, in fact, unstable. However, a tessellating sub-narrative is attuned to the gender politics of history and Ascendancy life. The recurring imagery of candles and fire in *A World of Love* evokes the gothic strain of female protagonists burning their houses, consciously or subconsciously, as a means of lashing out against the patriarchal structures which suppress their sexuality and commandeer their lives. As Margot Gayle Backus notes,

Big Houses symbolised the patriarchal construct by which Ascendancy women were oppressed – it is, therefore, unsurprising that the burning of such structures was often met with complacency, if not relief, by Ascendancy women (214). Aptly, Hermione Lee writes that the stultified situation at Montefort is “ignited” by the letters (94); the connection to the past embedded in them has repressed the female members of the family sexually and emotionally, a pressure which can only be released through fire. Throughout *A World of Love*, Jane is described in terms of fire: Antonia tells her “you have an igniting touch”, later envisages her as a “faraway pink flicker”, candles reflect in her eyes at Guy’s appearance, and Fred advises her to damn everyone “to blazes” (40; 66-7). Lilia’s chiding of Antonia for sleeping with a candle beside her – “I lie sleepless sometimes, picturing you in flames” – speaks to her resentment manifesting in a fixation with fire, and Jane pictures herself moving through the burning house, unscathed, as though she would relish burning Montefort (Wills 138). Lilia in particular conceptualises the route through repression as forged by fire: she later contemplates the “void” sky through the window, under a “smoky” ceiling (AWL 17). Her discovery that the letters were written by Guy has an effect on her not dissimilar to burning: she sweats, fans herself, and sticks to the chair as though burnt to it (AWL 42). Antonia, too, visualises the “annihilating need left by Guy” in terms of fire: “spurting threads of itself and smoke stinkingly upward towards the ceiling, crimsonly stuttering inside the gloom it made like an evil tongue” (AWL 76). Hence, Antonia determines to burn the letters, but, like everyone else and their pyromania, is thwarted in the effort – Kathie interrupts her in the kitchen as she is failing to open the range (AWL 121). However, after the letters eventually burn, Kathie is instructed to dispense with candles and bring in lamps, signifying a new era in more ways than one (AWL 122; 130).

Thus, from the outset of *A World of Love*, the “expectant” “coppery burnish” threatens to combust: the interminable heat of the novel and sustained fire imagery culminates in the burning of Guy’s letters (AWL 9). Through this act, Guy himself is finally allowed to die, a metaphorical cremation which impresses the necessity of debunking the past of its patriarchal myths. While the past may appear to offer stability, present relationships (such as Jane and Lilia’s salvaged one) proffer more genuine security and solidarity. In the closing scene, Jane is “a girl in a blazer”, “gold hair bent outward over the collar”, like a flame (AWL 149). Thus, she has blazed history, is herself a kind of blaze, and now steps forward into the future, having burned the bridges of the past.

In the “Afterword” to *Bowen’s Court*, Bowen seemingly submits herself to a patriarchal inheritance, noting that she is married, has lost her name, and has no children: inescapably, she is the last of her line. Bowen’s personal confrontation with the loss of her family heritage aligns with the general loss of Anglo-Irish culture and the selling and burning of many of the country houses which were the Ascendancy’s physical mark and spatial anchor in Ireland. With the destruction of the Big Houses, the “marked, if unconscious affinity” between the people became, for Bowen, increasingly important as a binding factor (Bowen, *The Irish Cousins* 188). In a review of Violet Powell’s study of Somerville and Ross, for instance, Bowen lingers on a depiction of communal, cosy Anglo-Ireland, alleging that “kinship, or a close degree of affinity, characterises the features and general attitude of the boater-hatted young women in starched white ankle length skirts and moustached young men ... at the edge of a tennis court between games” (Bowen, *The Irish Cousins* 239). This description of a tennis party is reminiscent of a similar moment in *The Last September*, with the only striking difference being that, in the latter, Lois feels affinity with no one, and is, in many ways, a marooned character. This existential isolation is encapsulated in the mother-narratives of Bowen’s fiction, contrasting rather sharply with some of the rose-tinted versions of Ascendancy life in her reviews. Bowen’s fictional characters seek, in some way or another, reunification with the mother as a means of deriving stability in the face of an Ascendancy in

limbo. In this sense, the mother-quest is the attempt to locate security beyond the patriarchal, inaccessible past of the Ascendancy by turning to personal relationships.

However, the frustrated desire for uterine fusion and the mother-daughter ambivalence exhibited in *The Last September* and *A World of Love*, respectively, suggests that the Ascendancy was historically a particularly heavy anchor on the female bond, and that Anglo-Irish maternal heritage suffered neglect as a result of a patriarchal past. Although both novels thus acknowledge the damage done by history, there is, nevertheless, cause for optimism in Bowen's work. In a letter to Virginia Woolf, Bowen notes that "the last chapter [of *Bowen's Court*] seems to, or ought to re-write respectively all the rest of the book" (qtd. in Lee, *The Mulberry Tree* 217). If the "Afterword" is to "re-write" *Bowen's Court*, its focus on the house's passing to Bowen comprises a repurposing of its erstwhile male-dominated history. Just as Bowen thus espouses a revisionist, hopeful approach to Ascendancy history in her family chronicle, the more pessimistic ending of *The Last September* is revised in the later *A World of Love*. While Lois fails to gain stability through the mother-bond, Jane's future (and that of the house) is secured only through rejecting the past, mending the mother-daughter relationship and forging a female future.

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