Rhesis International Journal of Linguistics, Philology and Literature

In search of a female identity: the suppressed mother in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*

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Abstract

The Last September (1929) is a novel particularly significant in Bowen's reflection on the definition of the female identity and on the role of the relationship with other women in determining a woman's possibilities for self-determination. Starting from Marianne Hirsch's analysis of mother-daughter plots, this contribution aims to illustrate the reasons for which the initial destabilizing role of the protagonist Lois against the conservatism of the family transforms, in the end, into passivity and subordination. This passage, following both Hirsch and Irigaray's thought, is due to two factors: the removal of the protagonist's origins, especially those relating to her mother, and the impossibility of a female genealogy for her surrogate mother and other women belonging to a patriarchal value system.

Key words – Elizabeth Bowen; *The Last September*; female identity; relational identity; female genealogy

1. Elizabeth Bowen's position in the British literary scene is still largely considered to be controversial[1]. Subject to a new critical attention in recent decades, her production is often associated with the "modern comedy of manners" and the realist tradition of Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Henry James[2]. The use of Gothic elements, the symbolic value of houses in her narrative as emblems of social oppression and family relationships – a central element also in *The Last September* (1929) – make her an author close to the Gothic[3], to the romance of the Brontë sisters, and at the same time close to the modernism of Lawrence. What most critical perspectives do agree on is that her marginal position has made her style distinct and personal, difficult to identify with the two cultures to which she belongs as an Anglo-Irish author. As a member of the Ascendancy, the English Protestant aristocracy who had settled in Ireland since the eighteenth century, Bowen

[1] See Siân WHITE, Pamela THURSCHWELL, "Introduction to 'Elizabeth Bowen and Textual Modernity: A Special Issue of Textual Practice'", «Textual Practice», 27 (2013), pp. 1-6; Susan OSBORN (ed.), *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2009; Neil CORCORAN, *Elizabeth Bowen. The Enforced Return*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2004.

[2] Phyllis LASSNER, *Elizabeth Bowen*, Basingstoke and London, Macmillan, 1990, pp. 141-142; Andrew BENNETT, Nicholas ROYLE (eds.), *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*, Basingstoke and London, St. Martin's, 1995, pp. XV-XVI.

[3] See James F. WURTZ, "Elizabeth Bowen, Modernism, and the Spectre of Anglo-Ireland", «Estudios Irlandeses», 5 (2010), pp. 119-128.

Rhesis. International Journal of Linguistics, Philology and Literature (ISSN 2037-4569)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13125/rhesis/5675
Literature, 8.2: 222-236, 2017

witnessed the definitive decline of her class during the civil war, and reading *The Last September* from the perspective of her liminality, as suggested by Phyllis Lassner,

> enables us to see her both as a British novelist and standing apart from its traditions. For she is a critic of those social and literary forces which shaped her work. In her comedies of manners she not only questions the morals of country and city life, but those literary traditions which reflect, express and prefigure them: romance elements and domestic realism are never taken at face value[4].

Bowen's novel, with its reuse of conventional models of femininity, questions the representative schemes transmitted by the literary tradition in which they originated. Her characters are pervaded by a state of disenchantment linked to a historical and cultural instability, which has undermined their rapport with the past and with the tradition. In the same way, the family relationships, central in much of her narrative, challenge the rigidity of the molds to which each member should conform. The mother-daughter bond[5], through Bowen's ambivalent characters, destabilizes social conventions and traditional literary schemes[6]. The centrality of the house and of domestic relations in her production, moreover, emphasize the claustrophobic, binding nature of these ties as they control the destiny and identity of the younger members. *The Last September*, from this point of view, shows the young protagonist Lois and her cousin Laurence in a triple condition of isolation, as orphans above all, devoid of horizontal blood relations, and surrounded by the rebel army in the Big House where they spend their summer holidays[7]. This same army, in the end, will also deprive them of their only remaining point of reference: the house[8].

I begin from Marianne Hirsch's analysis of the mother-daughter bond to show how the castrating force of the surrogate mother, Aunt Myra Naylor, arrests the protagonist's process of self-determination[9]. Hirsch's theoretical paradigm also hints at the second factor that limits the full affirmation of Lois's individuality: the removal of the maternal story from the narrative, a palimpsestuous plot which reappears in the form of a return of the repressed, and which conditions Lois's destiny as an unconscious and regressive force. Following Hirsch's proposal, the dynamic narrative model elaborated by Peter Brooks[10] will be adopted to illustrate the emancipatory strategies that Bowen's work uses to subvert dominant narrative models, in contrast to conventional endings or traditional models of linear narrative progression.

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4 LASSNER, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 143.

5 Heather INGMAN, "Elizabeth Bowen: The Mother Betrayed", in *Women's Fiction Between the Wars. Mothers, Daughters and Writing*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1998, pp. 68-86.

6 See also Elizabeth BOWEN, *The House in Paris*, London, Gollancz, 1935; repr. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976, and Elizabeth BOWEN, *The Heat of the Day*, London, Jonathan Cape, 1948; repr. London, Vintage, 1998.

7 See Beth WIGHTMAN, "Geopolitics and the Sight of the Nation: Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*", «Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory», 18.1 (2007), pp. 37-64.

8 On the Big House novel see Siân E. WHITE, "Spatial Politics/Poetics, Late Modernism, and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*", «Genre», 49.1 (2016), p. 31; Roy F. FOSTER, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972*, London, Allen Lane, 1988; Jacqueline GENET (ed.), *The Big House in Ireland: Reality and Representation*, Dingle, Brandon, 1991.

9 Marianne HIRSCH, *The Mother / Daughter Plot: Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, Bloomington/Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1989.

10 Peter BROOKS, *Reading for the Plot. Design and Intention in Narrative*, Cambridge (MA) and London, Harvard University Press, 1984.

The focus of the article is the failure of Lois's search for a female genealogy within the community formed by her female friends and Aunt Myra on the diegetic and symbolic level. In this case the term 'genealogy' will be understood as Luce Irigaray defines it[11]: as the possibility of a female ethics and sociality without male intermediation and as positive identification with one's sex. In order to illustrate how, in Bowen's novel, the impossibility of a female genealogy involves both vertical and horizontal relationships (with the 'mothers' and with other female figures, such as friends), I adopt Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic theory on the formation of the subject[12]. Her definition of a relational, fluid female identity is based on the idea of a woman's constant search for pre-Oedipal fullness in her relationship with other women.

This essay investigates the removal of Lois's origins and maternal history as the pivot on which turns the subversion of a real linear progression of her story. This subversion also manifests, on a symbolic and metaphorical level, as the constant return of the mother and to the mother. On a structural and temporal level, it creates suspension and the impossibility of progression, as exemplified by the open ending.

2. Bowen gives women and family bonds a prominent role in her novels. Lacking a recognized power in the society outside the domestic sphere, it is as wives and mothers that they exercise their power over the family community, becoming the standard-bearers of conservative values and using their daughters – natural or surrogate – as tools of legitimization of their position in society[13]. Their weight is therefore amplified by the role they play in the process of defining identity for younger female figures[14]. An emblematic example is offered in *The Last September* by the protagonist Lois, who from the first chapters brings to the foreground the issues of identity and of her liminality, since she is defined as the one who is in a hurry to grow up, although she has not yet decided whether she wants to "become a woman"[15]. The first section shows Lois searching for an answer about her identity in the horizontal relationship of friendship with Marda, Olivia and Lola, and in the vertical relationship with the substitute mother, her aunt Myra Naylor.

> She was, in fact, repelled by his lack of sympathy. "Lois," she said, "is nice. She is in such a hurry, so concentrated upon her hurry, so helpless. She is like someone being driven against time in a taxi to catch a train, jerking and jerking to help the taxi along and looking wildly out of the window at things going slowly past. She keeps hearing that final train go out without her. How I should hate to be young again! But, I had no ambition."[16]

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[11] See Luce IRIGARAY, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, Paris, Les éditions de Minuit, 1984; English translation by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, New York, Cornell University Press, 1993; ID., *Sexes et Parentés*, Paris, Les éditions de Minuit, 1987; Italian translation by Luisa Muraro, *Sessi e genealogie*, Milano, La Tartaruga, 1989.

[12] Nancy CHODOROW, *The Reproduction of Mothering. Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London, University of California Press, 1978, in particular chapters 6 and 7.

[13] IRIGARAY, *Sexes et Parentés*, pp. 74-76.

[14] See INGMAN, "Elizabeth Bowen: The Mother Betrayed", p. 68.

[15] See the dialogue with Marda, in the second chapter of the second part.

[16] Elizabeth BOWEN, *The Last September* , London, Constable, 1929; repr. New York, Random House, 2000, ebook, Part 1, Ch. 2 (all the quotations are from the ebook version and do not have page number).

Like many of Bowen's protagonists, Lois struggles silently against the narratives in which female identity is imprisoned. On several occasions, she does it with implicit and explicit references to literary clichés and patterns which have established conventional womanhood. The beginning of the story can be seen as a process of deconstruction of those calcified models of femininity, testifying to her intolerance of stereotypes and prescribed roles, seen as refuge and shelter in the face of the indeterminacy of her own position and identity.

In the first section, Lois is a character «in search of plot»[17], or a "masterplot"[18] and she resists the possibility of becoming a subject written by others, especially by her surrogate mother who plays a controlling role, preparing her to acquire a position in the patriarchal order.

Even if divisions among women and the difficulty of establishing female bonds within patriarchy are recurring themes in the contemporary narrative production, one of the peculiar traits of Bowen's novel is its attention to the consequences of these divisions[19]. This analysis of *The Last September* therefore aims to illustrate how the absence of a female genealogy transforms Lois's initial refusal of conventions, her desire to resist pre-established models, into paralysis[20].

The impossibility of Lois's finding a female community of reference is corroborated on multiple levels – lexical, metaphorical, and diegetic. The constant re-emergence of her true origins brings attention to the removal of the maternal element as the main cause of Lois's final condition of stasis. Lois's conformism at the end of the novel depends strictly on two factors: firstly on the complete subordination of the proximate female figures to a conservative system of values, which they also hand down to the younger generation; secondly it depends on the removal of the mother, the occultation of her story – "the murder of the mother" on which our culture is founded[21]. The last pages of the novel, which show Lois living abroad on her own following the plot written for her by her aunt Myra Naylor, confirm her transformation into a subject written by others.

The importance of labels and definitions is particularly marked on the lexical level, in which recurrent epithets are repeated several times. The most evident is Laurence's, «So intellectual»[22]. They are mainly imposed by adult family figures on the younger ones as a cage and perpetuation of a stereotype which they should embody. Significant in this respect is the episode in which Lois eavesdrops on a conversation between Myra and her friend Francie. Here, the protagonist's desire to escape from predefined models is expressed in the fear of hearing her aunt pronounce the adjective that refers to her:

> The voices spoke of love: they were full of protest. Love, she had learnt to assume, was the mainspring of woman's grievances. Illnesses all arose from it, the having of children, the illnesses children had; servants also, since the regular practice of love involved a home; by money it was confined, propped and moulded. Lois flung off the pillows and walked round the room quickly. She was angry; she strained to hear now, she quite frankly listened. But when Mrs. Montmorency came to: "Lois is very—" she was afraid suddenly. She had a panic. She didn't want to know what she

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17 Peter BROOKS, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 117.

18 On the definition of masterplot see BROOKS, *Reading for the Plot*, chapters 4 and 5.

19 INGMAN, "Elizabeth Bowen: The Mother Betrayed", p. 68.

20 IRIGARAY, *Sessi e genealogie*, p. 84 and *passim*.

21 See IRIGARAY, *Sessi e genealogie*, p. 21.

22 BOWEN, *The Last September*, *passim*.

> was, she couldn't bear it: knowledge of this would stop, seal, finish one. Was she now to be clapped down under an adjective, to crawl round life-long inside some quality like a fly in a tumbler? Mrs. Montmorency should not!
> She lifted her water jug and banged it down in the basin: she kicked the slop-pail and pushed the washstand about … It was victory […] Every time, before the water clouded, she was to see the crack: every time she would wonder – what Lois was. She would never know[23].

Even if for Lois the possibility of being associated with a definite image, a specific type or category, means to be trapped once and for all in a role, the last line suggests the absence of an answer to the protagonist's question about her identity. In fact, her search is soon interrupted and she enters a condition of passivity and stasis.

3. In *The Last September*, the titles of the three sections suggest the condition of transition of the characters living in the Big House. Arrivals and departures – the latter in both literal and metaphorical terms, referring to Gerald's death in the last section and to the rebels' destruction of the house – scan the few events of the plot. The condition of passage, however, is soon translated into a condition of suspension[24]. Potential plots and sentimental intrigues result in an impasse; all are suspended before they can come to an end.

A brief summary of the plot is useful at this stage so as to highlight some relevant narrative points. The story is set in the summer of 1920 at Danielscourt, where the orphaned Lois and her cousin Laurence – an Oxford student – went to spend their holidays with their uncles, among tennis tournaments, lunches, and meetings with other families of the Ascendancy to which the Naylors belong. Life is apparently peaceful in the Big House: the Naylors and their closest friends go about their lives while denying the tensions which are instead perceptible every time they overcome the garden that divides their home from the real life of the country.

In the unstable condition of the Ascendancy in those years, tensions are emphasized by the relations with English soldiers and officers sent in their defence against the rebel troops. The relationship established by the Naylors with the officers and British soldiers who constantly attend their home reflect these tensions and their dismissal: until the end Mrs Naylor diminishes the liaison between Lois and the British soldier Gerald, and in the last section she discourages him, without Lois's knowledge, from the idea of marrying her niece. In the second part of the novel, Lois, in turn, in transition after finishing college, trying to decide what to do when she "grows up", almost accepts Gerald's proposal even if she is not in love, due to her fear of having nothing else to live for outside of marriage. At this point, symbolic-diegetic analysis and the structural-metaliterary perspective converge: Lois – disoriented, with no place and no mother – lets herself be placed by the others. In the second part she follows Gerald's will, in the end that of Aunt Myra. The search for her role and her identity, rather than implying Lois's affirmation as the subject of her own story, seems to end in the passive acceptance of the conventional marriage plot. Conforming to tradition seems, to her, the only way out, and it is the first signal of her gradual passivity as a protagonist: as Del Mar Ruiz Martínez states, in the second section of the novel, Lois wants the romance to continue «since her passiveness does not

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[23] Bowen, *The Last September*, Part 1, Ch. 7.
[24] See BENNETT, ROYLE (eds.), *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*, pp. 15-22.

let her consider other options»[25]: «She felt quite ruled out, there was nothing at all for her here. She had better be going – but where? She thought: "I must marry Gerald"»[26].

Following her mother's legacy, Lois, on several occasions, manifests her awareness of her status as a woman and of the patriarchal order in which she is inscribed. Mrs. Naylor and her friend Francie, by contrast, not only hew to their prescribed roles without questioning them, but also strive to inscribe the younger generation in the same order. In this sense Lois, throughout the course of the first part – just like her mother in her youth – represents the potentially disruptive element against schemes and conventions in which she does not recognize herself.

Lacking validation from her absent mother, Lois does not reach the expected self-determination. Instead, she accepts the pure mimesis of pre-established models embodied by the other women who surround her[27]. It is she who first suggests that her constant search for a genealogy is aimed at finding her own place:

> "You like to be the pleasant young person?"
> "I like to be in a pattern." She traced a pink frond with her finger. "I like *to be related*; to have to be what I am. Just to *be* is so intransitive, so lonely."
> "Then you will like to be a wife and mother." Marda got off the writing-table and began to change her stockings. "Jacob's ladder," she explained. "It's a good thing we can always be women."
> "I hate women. But I can't think how to begin to be anything else."
> "Climate."
> "But I wouldn't like to be a man. So much fuss about doing things. Except Laurence – but he is such a hog. Ought I to go to London?"[28]

Bowen's operation is made extremely clear from this dialogue: while Lois's words recall a conception of relational identity[29], defined in relation to the other women and therefore implying a female community without male intermediaries, Lola's responses prefigure the impossibility of communication among women, since her answers mirror and reflect the absence of freedom and choice in conforming to a pre-established identity. It is in these terms that we should interpret Lois's statement, "I hate women": with this sentence the protagonist conveys her dislike not of women *tout court*, but rather of the conventional notion of femininity.

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[25] DEL MAR RUIZ MARTÍNEZ, María, "Elizabeth Bowen and the Anglo-Irish. Describing women in *The Last September*", «Babel-Afial», 19 (2010), pp. 97-112, *ivi* p. 104.

[26] BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 2, Ch. 7.

[27] In the two parts of this analysis the concept of repetition refers both to Irigarayan idea of mimesis (Luce IRIGARAY, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un*, Paris, Les éditions de Minuit, 1977; Italian translation by Luisa Muraro, *Questo sesso che non è un sesso. sulla condizione sessuale, sociale e culturale delle donne*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1980) and to the Freudian theory (Sigmund FREUD, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, Leipzig/Wien/Zurich, Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1920; English translation by James Strachey, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, New York/London, W. W. Norton and Company, 1961). The former highlights the imitation, reproduction of the role assigned to women, «playing the part in such a way that it becomes a masquerade or a parody» (Anne Claire MULDER, *Divine Flesh, Embodied Word 'Incarnation' as a Hermeneutical Key to a Feminist Theologian's Reading of Luce Irigaray's Work*, Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2006, p. 272), while the latter views repetition as a consequence of the suppression of the past, a regressive force through the elaboration of a trauma. Both ideas help to interpret the end of Lois's story in this context.

[28] BOWEN, *The Last September*, cit, Part 2, Ch. 4. The first emphasis is mine.

[29] See CHODOROW, *The Reproduction of Mothering*.

For Lois, therefore, female relationships are central in her development, aimed at questioning the models of femininity that each of them represent, particularly with reference to the sentimental scheme of romance in which they fit. In this traditionally Oedipal scheme, the happiness in the ending is notoriously subordinated to the woman's loss of control and authority as she enters into the man's house and the man's desire[30].

The main characters are six female figures, each involved in a sentimental affair, and symmetrically arranged: Myra and Richard Naylor have their counterpart in Francie and Hugo Montmorency; Marda, engaged to Leslie Lawes, is a model of femininity and emancipation for Lois, and serves as a foil for Viola. Their common life in London reinforces this symmetry, referring to the two opposing stereotypes of the (potential) *femme fatale* Viola in contrast to the (potential) mother and wife Marda. Finally, in her relationship with Gerald, Lois has her counterpart in Livvy and David Armstrong. They represent a possible model narrative for her love story. The dialectic among these female figures best expresses the tensions and contradictions in the definition of a female identity within contemporary society in which the regressive force of the past – well represented by Myra and Marda – clashes with the desire for self-determination. This desire undermines the very first institution to define the female role: the couple relationship and the family.

As the narrative's insistence on the issue of identity and label suggests, Lois is therefore placed in the centre of a field of dynamic tensions among these female figures and the models of femininity they represent. They comprise an axiology between the positive pole of freedom and self-determination and the negative one, that of the constraint of conformity and conventions, against which Lois initially mounts an active resistance.

In this axiology, Aunt Myra and Francie represent the two negative poles (emblems of constraint and non-freedom), while Viola occupies the opposing side. Viola is Lois's pen-pal and a potential *femme fatale* who becomes a model of control of one's own destiny, able to resist restrictions of any kind. Marda and Livvy represent the contradictory poles of 'freedom' and 'non-freedom' in this axiology. Both conform to the role of good fiancée and good wife, and the example of Livvy's engagement with Armstrong especially represents the alternative to family impositions, a possible narrative for Lois herself.

The novel pivots on the female figures and their couple relationships. At the very beginning, Lois reminds us that her involvement in a sentimental relationship with Gerald also suggests conformism to a pre-established role:

> She could not hope to explain that her youth seemed to her also rather theatrical and that she was only young in that way because grown-up people expected it. She had never refused a role. She could not forgo that intensification, that kindling of her personality at being considered very happy and reckless even if she were not[31].

Lois offers several testimonies of a search for the definition of her identity in relation with the others: however, it is not a relationship established horizontally, but it is an attempt to

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[30] The last sentence echoes Irigaray's criticism to the Freudian concept of marriage which «for woman [means] to turn away from her mother in order to enter into desire of and for man» (IRIGARAY, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p. 41).

[31] BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 1, Ch. 4.

restore the pre-Oedipal completeness that was prematurely lost, determining the development of one's own identity. In fact, it is especially women friends who play a crucial role in Lois's realization of a full individuality, especially those who are older or, in any case, considered wiser[32], an aspect that highlights the verticality of their relationship:

> Marda laughed and began screwing on the lids of her little pots. In the light of her brilliant life, her deftness seemed to Lois inimitable. One would have had to have lived twenty-nine years as fast, as surely and wildly, to screw pink celluloid caps on to small white pots with just that lightness of finger-tip, just that degree of amusement, just that detachment in smile and absorption in attitude. And the pink smell of nail-varnish, dresses trickling over a chair, flash of swinging shoe-buckle, cloud of powder over the glass, the very room with its level stare on the tree-tops, took on awareness, smiled with secrecy, had the polish and depth of experience. The very birds on the frieze flew round in cognizant agitation.
> "What a lovely dress!" said Lois, picking up the end of a red sleeve, so that she seemed to be standing hand in hand with the dress.
> "Vienna."
> "And, oh, what a lovely green one – Am I pawing things?"[33]

Close to the wedding in London, Marda becomes in Lois's view an emblem of femininity and experience, as the quick 'pan' over the objects scattered around her room exemplifies. It is no coincidence that their meeting brings to the fore several questions regarding Lois's own image in the eyes of others as well as her choices for the future[34]. Marda, however, unlike the other friend Viola, soon ceases to represent a positive model and starts to exemplify the regressive force towards traditional models. Her answers to Lois's doubts about her identity generate a first distance between the two girls[35], a distance increased in the following episodes by Marda's insistence on her desires as

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[32] See Helene DEUTSCH, *The Psychology of Women. A Psychoanalytic Interpretation*, New York, Grune and Stratton, 1944, pp. 9-10.

[33] BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 2, Ch. 4.

[34] See BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 2, Ch. 4: «Being grown up seems trivial, somehow. I mean, dressing and writing notes instead of letters, and trying to make impressions. When you have to think so much of what other people feel about you there seems no time to think what you feel about them. Everybody is genial at one in a monotonous kind of way» […] « Lois again realized that no one had come for her, after all. She thought: "I must marry Gerald." […] Ought I to go to London?».

[35] During the dialogue, Lois begins to think of her desires as a free girl, free from the constraints determined by her being a woman: «Of course she had not, she said, because of the War, and of course she would like to. There was Rome, and she would like to stay in a hotel by herself. There was just "abroad": she always wondered how long the feeling lasted. And there was America, but one would have to have introductions or one would get a crick in one's neck from just always looking up at things. She would like to feel real in London. […]. She liked mountains, but did not care for views. She did not want adventures but she would like just once to be nearly killed. She wanted to see something that only she would remember. Could one really float a stone in a glacier stream? She liked unmarried sorts of places. She did not want to see the Taj Mahal or the Eiffel Tower (could one avoid it?) or to go to Switzerland or Berlin or any of the Colonies. She would like to know people and go to dinner parties on terraces, and she thought it would be a pity to miss love. Could one travel alone? She did not mind being noticed because she was a female, she was tired of being not noticed because she was a lady. She could not imagine ever not wanting someone to talk to about tea-time. If she went to Cook's, could they look out all the trains for her, in Spain and everywhere? She had never been to Cook's» (BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 2, Ch. 4).

wife and mother[36]. However, to fully understand the passage from Lois's initial resistance to her final passivity, it is necessary to take into consideration further dynamics that gradually emerge. These start from the writing motif and lead the reader to the roots of Lois's search: her mother's history.

4. It has already been pointed out that Lois, an orphan who has lost her first authority, is a character searching for a plot for her own story. The writing motif creates a close link between the search for an identity, desire, and loss of one's reference point. The epistolary exchange with her friend Viola, if on the one hand has the effect of emphasizing the prescriptive function of female relationships around the protagonist – since, for Lois, Viola dictates the rules of a modern and emancipated femininity[37] – on the other hand allows Lois to write new possible narratives for her own story both in a literal and metaphorical sense. Metaphorically, because it is through the letters to Viola that Lois announces possible sequels of her story (never to be realized), real "repressed plots"[38]: she expresses her love for Hugo, an older and married man, and it is in the letter to Marda that she announces the decision to marry Gerald. And literally, because it is only through the writing of the letters that the unrealized possibilities take shape[39]. Starting from these textual clues, the reader can therefore grasp a bifurcation of the work between the level of the real and that of imagination, between the real plot which Lois is experiencing and a repressed one.

Having prematurely lost her first authority figure, Lois reminds us that the loss of origins and the problem of identity are strictly related. The issue of self-consciousness accompanies Lois throughout the course of the story, highlighting her condition as a decentred subject. At the origins of this decentrement is the removal of her maternal figure by those new authority figures who want to limit Laura's destabilizing power against the conservatism of their family.

It is once again the writing motif which proves how Laura's presence – like a ghost haunting the Big House[40] – is constantly expressed in terms of a return of the repressed, an unsolved past able to condition Lois's story development and to conduct her search for a masterplot to the final immobility and stasis. There are many signals of this close link between writing and the return of the absent mother starting – as Bennett and Royle pointed out – from the constant reference to the laurels:

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[36] See BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 2, Ch. 4: «"Then you will like to be a wife and mother." […] she explained. "It's a good thing we can always be women."», a statement recalled in the moment in which Marda expresses her greatest desire: «Marda said, inconsequent – "I hope I shall have some children; I should hate to be barren"» (Part 2, Ch. 7).

[37] See BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 1, Ch. 8: «Viola did think Lois took feeling rather too earnestly. Lois must not grow less interesting. She admitted the little Gerald might be affecting; he was permitted to happen once. Gerald assimilated, she should be more of a woman. Only don't lose detachment, darling; do not lose distance. Viola would be delighted if Lois would give her Trivia. She confessed it did startle her to be reminded that up to now she had been only eighteen by this talk of a nineteenth birthday».

[38] See BROOKS, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 117.

[39] See BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 1, Ch. 8: «She wrote to Viola that she feared she might be falling in love with a married man. But when she looked at Mr. Montmorency next morning at breakfast, and still more when she had to drive him back from Mount Isabel, the idea seemed shocking. She regretted having sent her letter to post in such a hurry»; Part 3, Ch. 5: «But as a matter of fact, I have no future, in their sense. I have promised to marry Gerald».

[40] CORCORAN, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 39.

> A shrubbery path was solid with darkness, she pressed down it. Laurels breathed coldly and close: on her bare arms the tips of the leaves were timid and dank, like tongues of dead animals. Her fear of the shrubberies tugged at its chain, fear behind reason, fear before her birth; fear like the earliest germ of her life that had stirred in Laura. She went forward eagerly, daring a snap of the chain, singing, with a hand to the thump of her heart: dramatic with terror. She thought of herself as forcing a pass. In her life – deprived as she saw it – there was no occasion for courage, which like an unused muscle slackened and slept[41].

In the first pages of the novel, the episode of Lois's walk along the laurel path explicitly links the laurels and her mother's name[42]. The reference to the mother and the laurel, symbol of poetry and "linguistic profusion"[43], also echoes in the name of the character who represents literary writing: Laurence. It is he, in one of the most significant episodes in Danielstown – the sleepless night for all the inhabitants of the house, inaugural of a new dreamlike parenthesis within the novel – whose daydream establishes a close connection between writing and possible narratives, and in particular with the rewriting of the fates of Laura and Lois:

> Darkness resumed, with an uncomfortable suggestion of normality. There seemed proof that the accident of day, of action, need not recur. And from this blank full stop, this confrontation of a positive futurelessness, his mind ran spiderlike back on the thread spun out of itself for advance, stumbling and swerving a little over its own intricacy. He caught trains he had missed, rushing out to the boundless possible through the shining mouths of termini, re-ordered meals in a cosmopolitan blur, re-ate them, thought of thought but sheered away from that windy gulf full of a fateful clapping of empty book-covers. Far enough back, in a kind of unborn freedom, he even remade marriages. Laura Naylor gave Hugo, scoffingly, bridal tenderness; they had four sons and all hurried out to coarsen in Canada. Here, in this that had been her room, Laura had lain on her wedding morning, watching a spider run up to the canopy of the bed, while Hugo made ready, five miles off, to be driven over to take her hand at the altar by poor John Trent, and the four young sons in excitement jiggled among the cherubim. And it was Richard who married Francie, who came to him all in a bloom at his first request and made a kind of a basinette of a life for him, dim with lace. Aunt Myra enjoyed a vigorous celibacy, while Laurence, to be acclaimed a second Weiniger, blew out his brains at – say – Avila, in a fit of temporary discouragement without having heard of Danielstown. Lois, naturally, was not born at all[44].

It is no coincidence that Laurence's novel, which, as he declares the following morning, found its genesis in this daydream, is a novel with which he means «to vindicate modern young people for his aunt and her generation»[45]. Laurence's desire to do this is

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41 BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 1, Ch. 4.

42 Laura, as Bennett and Royle observe, in ancient Greek means «lane, passage, alley» (BENNETT, ROYLE (eds.), *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*, p. 160). On Laura function in the novel see also pp. 16-17.

43 BENNETT, ROYLE (eds.), *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*, p. 160.

44 BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 1, Ch. 5.

45 BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 2, Ch. 6.

the linking element in Lois's story, connecting her search for her mother, the creation of alternative plots for their story, and the definition of their identity.

The ending, showing Lois in a condition of suspension, passivity and inertia at the antipodes to her position in the first section, forces the reader to go back and re-read Lois's path exactly as a repetition of that story that has tried to emerge among the lines from the beginning, Laura's story:

> "She wanted her mind made up," he said at last, "and I couldn't do that – why should I? I had enough to do with my own mind. And she was Richard's own sister – talk and talk and you'd never know where you had her. And if she thought you had her, she'd start a crying-fit. Then she went up North and met Farquar, and I imagine that that was all fixed up before she knew where she was or had time to get out of it. After that of course she really had got something to be unhappy about. Yet I don't believe things ever really mattered to Laura. Nothing got close to her: she was very remote. […] She had met Laura in England and been very shy of her. Laura was a success in England and so quite brilliant – she was too Irish altogether for her own country. Lois had been at school as usual and did not come home because Laura had forgotten which day the Montmorencys were coming. Six months afterwards, without giving anyone notice of her intention, Laura had died"[46].

Laura's story surfaces in several circumstances during the narration as an enigmatic element, largely buried, and therefore inaccessible for her daughter: the truth about the relationship between Laura and Hugo and the real reasons for the Hugo's presence at Laura's home when Lois was a child emerge as traces of a removed past, as a return of the repressed, and it is no coincidence that is Laurence's *daydream* is the only episode in which a different destiny for their love story is expressed. An emblematic image of what Laura has become in relation to the family's story is the episode in which Lois discovers writings and a sketch of her mother in the Big House's box room:

> Meanwhile Lois was very melancholy in the box-room. The window was dark with ivy, she could not see out. The room was too damp for the storage of trunks that were not finished with anyhow; mustiness came from her mother's old vaulted trunks and from a stack of crushed cardboard boxes. On the whitewash, her mother, to whom also the box-room had been familiar, had written L. N., L. N., and left an insulting drawing of somebody, probably Hugo. She had scrawled with passion; she had never been able to draw. Lois looked and strained after feeling, but felt nothing. Her problem was, not only how to get out unseen, but why, to what purpose?[47]

The metonymical relation of the box room, to which the signs of Laura are relegated, with the Big House reminds us the role of the whole family but in particular of Aunt Myra. For it was she who imposed on Lois an "official plot" standing over the repressed plot, the story of her mother, which Lois will be forced to repeat precisely because her mother has been removed.

The episode of the box room is also central to the writing motif. In this case, the close encounter with the traces left by Laura – her signature and a drawing – shows us

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[46] BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 1, Ch. 2.
[47] BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 2, Ch. 8.

Lois trying to decipher the maternal enigma: on a metaphorical level, Lois's attempt at interpretation emphasizes how the recurrent lack of an author is related to the absence of her mother. These traces are a code without referent[48], they are split signs which generate disparate associations: the absence of the authority of reference is thus linked through this pivotal episode to «the mad proliferation of textualities»[49] that characterizes this novel.

Seemingly random events are in fact linked to the unconscious but insistent force of the past, since the mother's experience, though removed by the repressive forces of the family, continues to re-emerge in the text, to influence Lois's destiny and to exercise its regressive power. The main motives of the novel are therefore repression and suppression, which are expressed on the formal and syntactic level – where ellipses, suspensions, and unspoken words predominate[50] – and on the diegetic and structural ones, since all the possible narratives and sentimental intrigues do not fully develop. They are only sketched out, then interrupted and left pending before the energies charged through the narration converge in a final denouement. The same can be said for Lois's story, constantly conditioned by the indirect references to another plot, the one which speaks of her origins. But she is incapable of decoding it, resulting in the transformation of her attempt at self-determination into an *erroneous* plot, in the etymological sense of a path without direction.

As Brooks states in *Reading for the Plot*, that periodic resurfacing and returning of the removed material which is her mother's story is an active reworking conducted by Lois, but without mastering and understanding the suppressed plots, Lois can only repeat the same path as her mother. The return to the origins and to the repressed past at the end lead Lois back to what her mother had already experienced and remind us that we cannot progress if we have not reckoned with the past and its enigmas.

The last pages, in which Lois is eclipsed – a significant cancellation as it echoes Laura's story – by the voice of Aunt Myra, who tells the reader of the departure of Lois («went to France to learn a new language») are a perfect synthesis between the outcome of Laura's story and the plot written for her by Aunt Myra:

> "[…] And tell me; how's Lois?"
> "Oh, gone, you know."
> "Gone? Oh, the school of art!"
> "Oh, no," said Lady Naylor, surprised. "Tours. For her French, you know. And to such an interesting, cultivated family; she is really fortunate. I never have been happy about her French. As I said to her, there will be plenty of time for Italian."
> "Oh, that's splendid," Mrs. Trent said vaguely but warmly. "Then of course you must feel quiet. […]"[51]

Lois, unable to recover the lost thread with her mother, was unable to read the plot which was gradually being composed for her by her aunt. The repetition of her mother's history confirms Lois's need to re-elaborate her origins and the involuntary repetition of the past in the present. The resurfacing of her mother's story in Lois's present proves

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[48] See BROOKS, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 134.

[49] BROOKS, *Reading for the Plot*, p. 132.

[50] BENNETT, ROYLE (eds.), *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel*, pp. 15-22.

[51] BOWEN, *The Last September*, Part 3, Ch. 8.

that her own story, from the beginning, was mined and rewritten by other forces operating in the text: her own suppressed origins and the plot which her substitute mother was writing for her. The regressive and conservative familiar forces have neutralized Lois's potential destabilizing power: devoid of a female genealogy, forced to conform to the established models, she returns to her initial atopic condition[52].

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[52] On the concept of female atopia see Adriana CAVARERO, *Nonostante Platone. Figure Femminili nella filosofia antica*, Roma, Editori Riuniti, 1990; Paola DONADI, *Generi: differenze nelle identità*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2000, p. 53.

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