

Film Synopsis

Handout A

The Last September, a major motion picture opening at a theater near you in April, was directed by Deborah Warner. Its renowned cast includes Academy Award winner Maggie Smith, Michael Gambon, Jane Birkin, Fiona Shaw, Lambert Wilson and Keeley Hawes. The film, based on the novel *The Last September*, by Elizabeth Bowen, incorporates memories and experiences of this distinguished Anglo-Irish novelist.

The Last September is set in County Cork, Ireland, during the 1920 War of Independence. As the “native” Irish carry on the struggle for independence that began with the 1916 insurrection known as the Easter Rebellion, 19-year-old Lois Farquar struggles to sort out her feelings for two young men—British army captain Gerald Colthurst and Irish freedom-fighter Peter Connolly.

The story unfolds at Danielstown, the country home where Sir Richard Naylor and his wife, Lady Myra, live a life of privileged complacency. They belong to the class of Anglo-Irish aristocracy called the Ascendancy — the heirs of English immigrants in Ireland,

who sound and appear English, but consider themselves Irish. The Naylor family try their best to pretend that the war around them is nothing more than the usual shenanigans. However, behind the facade of set-piece dinners, tennis parties and army dances is the knowledge that an essentially feudal way of living is nearing an end.

Staying at Danielstown are Lois, Sir Richard’s niece; Laurence Carstairs, an Oxford undergraduate who is Lady Myra’s nephew; and house guests Hugo and Francie Montmorency, old friends of the Naylor family. Into this apparently tranquil world come two disruptive figures. The first is Marda Norton, an Anglo-Irish woman in her 30s, who has come to determine if the love she felt for Hugo Montmorency 10 years earlier can be rekindled. The second is freedom fighter Peter Connolly, Lois’ childhood friend, who is hiding out in an old water mill on the Danielstown estate. Lois finds herself frighteningly fascinated by the menacingly playful and violent young man who provides a stark contrast to the staid, “safe” life that Gerald Colthurst represents.

Historical Background

Understanding the events leading up to the period when *The Last September* takes place is key to a better appreciation of this compelling film.

Ireland’s connection with Great Britain dates to the twelfth century and the invasion by Henry II of England, who was ultimately recognized as “Lord of Ireland.” Although English law was introduced, enforcement was quite lenient until the seventeenth century. In 1801, the Act of Union created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and despite substantial opposition, Ireland became an integral part of the United Kingdom.

There was a steady decline in the Irish economy during the early 1800s. From 1846 to 1848, the country was devastated when, during the Great Potato Famine, approximately one million people died of starvation and fever, and some two million people emigrated to North America. Emigration continued for 20 years after the famine. Many landowners, unable to collect rents from their tenant farmers, sold their estates. Eviction of tenants became a widespread practice. In addition, tenant cottages were destroyed by the landlords to prevent other impoverished families from occupying them. Thirty years later, in the winter of 1878-79, massive crop failures and falling crop prices triggered an economic crisis that threatened rural Ireland with another disaster comparable to that of the potato famine.

In 1881, Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone introduced the Land Act of 1881, which addressed three long-standing demands of tenant farmers: fair rents, protection against arbitrary eviction, and the right of a tenant farmer to transfer or sell his lease. This act paved the way for additional reforms, including the Wyndham Land Purchase Act of 1903, which provided generous incentives for landlords to sell their estates to the occupying tenants.

Following the Parliamentary elections of 1906, the home rule movement in Ireland, which had declined for a number of years, began again. Forces for and against the movement began to grow, and Ireland was on the verge of civil war. Home-rule legislation eventually was enacted, but it was suspended due to the onset of World War I. Postponement of home rule hardened attitudes, and supporters began to demand full independence rather than the lim-

ited autonomy provided in the suspended legislation. In April 1916, Irish nationalists unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow British rule in an uprising known as the Easter Rebellion. The rebel leaders were executed, martial law ensued, and a number of innocent civilians were shot.

In 1919, members of the Sinn Féin, a nationalistic movement, met in Dublin and—taking a page from American and French history—passed a Declaration of Independence and ratified the Republic that had been proclaimed during the unsuccessful uprising in 1916. The Irish Republican Army was organized as the new government’s militia. The Irish revolution—euphemistically deemed “The Troubles” by Unionist supporters—had begun. The IRA began a campaign of ambushes and attacks on British barracks, and the British government retaliated with ruthless reprisals. A large number of the Irish police resigned and were replaced with British recruits, who, as a result of their hybrid uniforms, became known as the Black and Tans. Living in Ireland were a group of Anglo-Irish aristocrats (as seen in *The Last September*) called the Ascendancy. They were the wealthy heirs of English immigrants, who sounded and appeared English, although they considered themselves Irish.

In 1920 (the period in which *The Last September* is set), the conditions had deteriorated to the point where the British government was forced, in part due to American pressure, to pass the Government of Ireland Act, which divided the country into two self-governing areas—Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland. Both areas were to have limited powers of self-government within the United Kingdom. On December 6, 1921, the Anglo-Irish Treaty established the Irish Free State as an independent member of the British Commonwealth. The six northern counties remained as part of the United Kingdom.

In 1937, a new constitution was approved. It restored the name “Ireland,” and provided for a president, a cabinet headed by a prime minister, and a parliament. In 1948, Ireland seceded from the British Commonwealth, and on April 18, 1949, the Republic of Ireland was established.

A Discussion Guide

Handout B

The statements and questions on this sheet are designed as starter ideas for discussion after viewing *The Last September*.

The Love Story

■ *The Last September* is, above all else, a love story. On the brink of womanhood, Lois Farquar is unsure of her feelings for two very different men in her life—Captain Colthurst and Peter Connolly, the childhood friend who has become a freedom fighter. What do you think appeals to her about each young man? How might those feelings be defined by her place in society? Her upbringing? How have these social constraints changed over the years?



■ Lois Farquar is a typical upper-class young woman of her time who is in the process of coming of age. Elizabeth Bowen's Lois is in many ways similar to another privileged young woman of a slightly earlier time—Jane Austen's Emma, the heroine of the book by the same name. Both young women are at an age when they have no idea how little they know, and especially, perhaps, how little they know about themselves. Consider other novels you have read that deal with coming of age in different ways and in different eras—including, possibly, F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic, *The Great Gatsby*. Discuss which stories you found most compelling and why.

■ Screenwriter John Banville describes Marda Norton as follows: "Marda, despite her sophisticated London manner, is a kind of elemental force and her presence in the house is emotionally and psychologically disruptive." What about Marda is "emotionally and psychologically disruptive"? How does her "presence" affect the other characters?



■ Consider the impact that civil conflict can have on human relationships. In *The Last September*, Lois feels a strong attraction to Peter Connolly, whose cause, if successful, will most assuredly bring an end to her privileged way of life. Do you think a romance between this mismatched pair could have any hope of success? Would such a romance, involving two young people from different social classes and different sides of a conflict, stand a better chance today? What other novels or films treat this same theme?

A Changing Way of Life

■ Marda tells British Captain Gerald Colthurst that the Anglo-Irish are "Irish. We look like you, we speak like you, but we're not you. We're not so much a people as a tribe, really. And of course, tribal people always prefer their own." Do you think this observation is shared by the other members of the Ascendancy? By Lois?

■ The title of the film—*The Last September*—is a rich metaphor for the demise of a way of life. The Naylor and their friends, part of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy, have lived a life that is moneyed, graceful, and essentially feudal. But the British forces and the Irish freedom fighters are waging war around them and their world is about to change dramatically. Hugo Montmorency understands that, in his words, "the game is up." Discuss how you think that "game" played out for the various characters in the film and their real-life counterparts.

■ The characters portrayed in *The Last September*—from the proper, image-conscious Naylor to the intense young Peter Connolly—are very much products of their times. However, they are also, in many respects, timeless. Discuss how both points of view may be valid.

The Effects of War

■ The characters in *The Last September* present a dramatic range of perspectives on—and reactions to—the Irish war of independence. Consider the two extremes: Lady Myra, speaking of the violence taking place around her insulated world, says, "From all the talk, you might think almost anything was going to happen, but we never listen." Peter Connolly, on the other hand, in response to Lois' question about why he keeps on fighting and killing, says, "Because we want to win. You'll have to go. All of you. It's over, that world." Discuss reasons why the Naylor's attempt to ignore the war and dismiss its significance is understandable.

■ How would you characterize the perspective of the British army—as represented in the character of Gerald Colthurst—about what they were doing in Ireland? Do you believe the issues were as clear—or as emotional—to the British soldiers as they were to the Irish freedom fighters? Have you, or someone close to you, had firsthand experience with an armed conflict?

On Your Own

Handout C

If you enjoyed *The Last September*, you might like to read the novel on which the screenplay is based: *The Last September*, by Elizabeth Bowen, published by Anchor Books, a division of Random House. Other titles by Elizabeth Bowen are listed below.

About the Author

Elizabeth Bowen, was born in June 1899, the only child of Henry Cole Bowen and his wife, Florence Colley Bowen. Because of Henry Bowen's law practice, the family divided their time between Dublin and the family home, Bowen's Court, in County Cork. As a young girl, Elizabeth enjoyed a typical Anglo-Irish childhood. When she was about six years old, her father suffered a nervous breakdown that caused him to be hospitalized off and on for several years. During that time, Elizabeth and her mother moved to England to stay with relatives.

When Elizabeth was 13, her mother died of cancer, and she was sent to a boarding school in Kent. The school, which encouraged her writing, had a strong influence on her, both as a writer and as a proper young Anglo-Irish woman. Elizabeth enjoyed drawing and painting, and attended art school for a time, but withdrew because she felt she was not sufficiently talented. She decided that writing was her calling and began to write fiction, incorporating her memories and experiences into her stories. Her first volume of short stories, *Encounters*, was published in 1923, the year she married Alan Charles Cameron. Her first novel, *The Hotel*, was published in 1927, followed two years later by *The Last September*.

Director Deborah Warner said Elizabeth Bowen "explores the tension between the surface of people's lives and their seething, boiling, emotional worlds underneath. She combines this emotional intensity with great humor and meticulous social observation." Bowen died at her home in Kent in 1973. Her husband had passed away 21 years earlier.

Some Points to Consider After Further Reading

- *The Last September* is a psychological drama that depicts the tensions between love and the longing for freedom, between tradition and change. And, it is a portrait of a young woman who is coming of age in a tumultuous time and place. Think about how Elizabeth Bowen might have relied upon her own experiences as she developed the character of Lois Farquar.
- Elizabeth Bowen wrote these words: "Some people are molded by their admirations, others by their hostilities." Think about how this statement could be applied to the characters in *The Last September* or to those in her other works.
- Elizabeth Bowen's writing has been characterized by biographer Victoria Glendinning as "life with a lid on it." After reading several of her other novels, think about whether her characters generally fit that characterization.

Writing Your Own Memoir

Elizabeth Bowen called upon her own experiences in her novels. *The Heat of the Day*, written in 1949, is considered by some to be one of the best records of London during World War II.

You may want to record a period or experience in your own life for yourself or for your children and grandchildren. It could become a treasured family legacy, and the process will provide you with an opportunity to revisit key events of your life from the perspective of time and experience. Here are some suggested starting points:

- Pick a meaningful event from your past.
- Describe why it stands out in your mind.
- Explain what led up to the experience
- How did the experience change or impact your life?
Describing the local or world situation at the time would add valuable insight into your story.
- As an alternative to writing your memoir, record it on an audio or videotape.

Suggested Reading

Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer, by Victoria Glendinning, Phoenix Paperbacks, 1988.

Works by Elizabeth Bowen

Many of Elizabeth Bowen's works have been reprinted in paperback. They include:

- Eva Trout*, Penguin USA, 1995.
- Irish Stories*, Duffer Editions, 1997.
- The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*, Ecco Press, 1996.
- The Death of the Heart*, Anchor Books, 2000.
- The Heat of the Day*, Penguin Books, 1991.
- The Hotel*, Penguin Books, 1995.
- The House in Paris*, Penguin USA, 1994.
- The Last September*, Anchor Books, 2000.
- The Little Girls*, Penguin Books, 1992.

Works by screenwriter and novelist John Banville

- Athena: A Novel*, Vintage Books, 1996.
- Doctor Copernicus: A Novel*, Vintage Books, 1993.
- Ghosts*, Vintage Books, 1994.
- Kepler*, Vintage Books, 1993.
- The Untouchable*, Vintage Books, 1998.

More Stories Set in Ireland

- 1916: A Novel of the Irish Rebellion*, by Morgan Llywelyn.
Forge Books, 1999.
- Angela's Ashes*, by Frank McCourt. Simon and Schuster, 1996.
- Dubliners*, by James Joyce. Vintage Books, 1993.

Books About Irish History

- How the Irish Saved Civilization*, by Thomas Cahill, Anchor Books, 1996.
- Irish Battles: A Military History of Ireland*, by G.A. Hayes-McCoy. Barnes & Noble Books, 1997.