

SOCIAL VIOLENCE IN MOLLY KEANE'S *THE*
RISING TIDE

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SOCIAL VIOLENCE IN MOLLY KEANE'S *THE RISING TIDE*

Molly Keane's novels represent the last vestiges of a body of writing which can be exceedingly difficult to trace given the complex nature of Irish history. Some scholars suggest the "Anglo-Irish" Ascendancy stemmed primarily from a series of various migrations into Ireland around the 12th century, notably the settling of English planters who took root in Ireland around the year of 1167 under Henry II (Moynahan 3). The term "Anglo-Irish," however, remains elusive given that it has been used to refer to blood, religious, historical, or social ties. Regardless of their origins, the Anglo-Irish continued to proliferate in Ireland for centuries, maintaining their Ascendancy in matters of politics and social privilege despite being a minority. The Anglo-Irish endeavored to preserve British rule in Ireland, perhaps overzealously, with the Act of Union in 1800. Paradoxically, while this act molded the Anglo-Irish identity for the century to follow and allowed a distinct literature to blossom, it ultimately ensured the Anglo-Irish's downfall (Moynahan 6). Having to perform a "balancing act" between supporting the Irish rebels and the British Auxiliaries just enough not to elicit a reprisal from either side proved perilous for many Anglo-Irish families¹.

¹ The phrase "balancing act" is taken from Julian Moynahan's section on Elizabeth Bowen, specifically her novel *The Last September*, recounting an Anglo-Irish family's involvement with British soldiers as well as their brief encounters with Irish guerillas (240).

The true death knell of the Anglo-Irish, however, arrived in 1922 after a Peace Treaty between Britain and Sinn Fein established Ireland as a free state, forcing the British “Black and Tans,” and the protection they offered the Anglo-Irish, out of Ireland. The civil war that soon followed left the Anglo-Irish in a quagmire². The radically changing environment had tremendous effects on most Anglo-Irish families despite the fact that the political turbulence is barely registered in most of their literature, Molly Keane’s being no exception.

Molly Keane was born in 1904 and wrote her first novel at the young age of seventeen under the pseudonym M.J. Farrell, a name she used when she wrote *The Rising Tide* in 1937. In this way, she kept her identity hidden through the majority of her career largely because of the class she belonged to, a class which primarily concerned itself with the sports of hunting and riding. The Anglo-Irish obsession with recreation, largely a product of their effort to maintain their image as an Ascendant, leisure class, led to the branding of most academic pursuits as shameful, even perverse. In an interview with Polly Devlin, Keane confesses that she could only surmise that her mother disapproved of her novels since she had not once discussed them with her (n. pag.). Some of the best evidence for this obsession with leisure can be found in Keane’s own novels. In 1981’s *Good Behaviour*, for instance, two parents punish their son and fire his sitter when he is caught reading a book of poems. The offense, it seems, didn’t lie so much with the contents of the book, but that it was read at 3:30 in the afternoon, a time normally devoted to riding (33). Molly Keane achieved perhaps greater success as a playwright than as a novelist, but following the poor reviews of one of her plays, she retreated to Ardmore, primarily to attend to her daughters, still writing occasionally but publishing nothing for twenty years. The publication of *Good Behaviour* under her real name marked her return or, for some, her debut to the literary

² The historical suffering of the Anglo-Irish during this time period is interpreted differently from scholar to scholar. Vera Kreilkamp accounts for nearly two hundred Big Houses that were burned in the aftermath (6). Michael McConville argues that the largest setback recorded in the time period was the loss of population to emigration or assimilation. He explains, “there were very few instances of reprisal or ostracism for past slights or wrongs. The rich still lived in the Big Houses, hunted, shot, fished, farmed, were stewards of the Jockey Club, . . . and lavish entertainers of guests” (263).

world and would be followed by two other mainstays of her oeuvre, *Time After Time* and *Loving and Giving*. *The Rising Tide*, however, remains a critically neglected work along with her other early novels despite initiating a trajectory in Keane's career towards the kind of satirical novels her later career produced.

The Rising Tide begins where most of Molly Keane's early "hunting romances" ended. Lady Charlotte McGrath is the matriarch and principal authority figure at Garonlea estate, extremely conservative and traditional in her views on parenting, courtship, and social life. She greets the engagement of her son, Desmond McGrath, with Cynthia Hamish at first with approval and excitement. Cynthia, the main protagonist, is a product of the Jazz Age, more interested in drinking, fashion, throwing parties, and riding than the austere existence at Garonlea. Tensions begin to escalate in the novel when Cynthia befriends the McGrath daughters, Muriel, Enid, Violet, and Diana, and Garonlea soon becomes a house divided when the once compliant daughters begin openly defying and rebelling against their domineering mother and her tyrannical social code. Cynthia and Desmond separate from the family proper when they move into their own estate, Rathglass, which soon becomes a means of escape for Diana, another protagonist, from her mother. As Lady Charlotte's reign begins to crumble, Cynthia's power escalates as she begins raising her own son and daughter, seizes control of Garonlea after Lady Charlotte's death, and establishes there her own cultural and social dominion. With the maturation of her children, however, her power slowly begins to wane, and Cynthia realizes she is also subject to the inevitable cycle of cultural rise and fall which removed Lady Charlotte from power. As Simon and Susan McGrath begin to mature and outgrow the influence of the Jazz Age culture of their mother, becoming less and less concerned with riding and hunting, the reader observes a cultural changing of the guard, leaving Cynthia estranged and obsolete. However, the tradition of social cruelty persists even with Garonlea's new landlord, proving that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.

Declan Kiberd describes the kind of Anglo-Irish life depicted in novels like *The Rising Tide* as an “embalmed” or confined existence beholden to a long-standing, restricting social code which disallowed those governed by it to express or display any kind of personal emotion in a social manner (370). Symptomatic of this social absence is a latent, but easily observable “vein of cruelty,” pinpointed by Bridget O’Toole as a common trait of most characters in “Big House” novels manifested as a conscious or subconscious tendency towards violence (126). This cruelty is without a doubt a socio-psychological one, based on cultural trends that develop and collide across generations. Vera Kreilkamp confirms that “the house is the setting of psychic battles between the generations, and Anglo-Irish life is reduced to oppressive social decorum” (187). These moments of violence also represent supporting material for scholars when they categorize Keane as a dark satirist, as these moments so often seem trivial in the depiction of everyday Anglo-Irish life. For instance, the following passage depicts an almost inhuman narrator more concerned with a servant’s error in preparing a dish than with her violent outbreak:

The funniest turn of them all took her one evening when, bent on success at all costs, she added a frothing soap powder to her immortal cheese soufflé. Minor disturbances, such as threatening the postman with a knife when, for the twentieth time, her expectancy of a letter was disappointed, were passed over, but the soap powder was a little frightening. (*Loving and Giving* 101)

Many of Molly Keane’s novels, however, including *The Rising Tide*, extend beyond domestic satire into an examination of the insular, complicated drama that unfolds in the Anglo-Irish “Big House.” In other words, the novel is closer in genre to War Tragedy in the sense that the characters enact and confront violence socially on a seemingly frivolous, yet crucial battlefield of leisure, fashion, and decorum. Keane, in fact, uses military expressions extensively throughout her prose in an attempt to portray characters as complex victims inside a violent social world over which they have no control. There is no laughter in a Molly Keane novel that isn’t accompanied by a serious and distinct foreboding, her characters and literature instructing first

and entertaining second. Incidents like the soufflé scandal, for instance, where the narrator fails to fully explain the servant's violent behavior or the letter which never arrives, suggest that such events are so common in the Big House their explanation is quite unnecessary. From this perspective, the dark, comedic element of Keane's fiction also serves another, perhaps, greater function which allows the reader to observe the deeply rooted and often disturbing psychological state of being Anglo-Irish.

Very little physical violence occurs in *Rising Tide*, but the social battles that take place between Lady Charlotte and Cynthia, the two "Queens" of the novel, acquire such hyperbolic dimensions that it becomes clear that their respective estates, Garonlea and Rathglass, take on the characteristics of two warring nations, and Keane's language and narratorial techniques seem to amplify this impression. I will begin the essay by examining the two estates, how and why they are used to create the setting of the novel, and the effect they have on the principal characters. The cruelty carried out in different forms by the characters, only intensifying from generation to generation, reveals a military-like aggression in their thoughts and actions which I will also investigate. Despite the fact that this cultural war is reduced by scholars to mere satire – since the battles are largely fought over clothing, food, social mannerisms, and recreation – Keane is attentive in developing a pathos in her characters who are subject to a system of inequitable gender rights and a passive-aggressive social atmosphere. Finally, I will discuss the role of Keane's narrator in *The Rising Tide*, a narrator whose voice renders the insularity of the Anglo-Irish into an epic, historical narrative.

The insularity depicted in many Big House novels, Keane's notwithstanding, has been challenged by some in light of historical scholarship. McCormack posits a different vision of Anglo-Irish culture not as remotely positioned "beyond the pale," but much closer to urban, industrialized areas. However, McCormack himself makes the distinction between historical veracity and cultural self-representation: "While Irish industrialization and urban development should not be written off as non-existent, it is still true that in Britain middle-class behavior was

increasingly associated with the life of the towns while Ireland saw itself as a rural community with incidental conurbations” (9). In the context of *The Rising Tide*, the physical geography seems quite distant from any urban center. The carriage ride early in the novel when Cynthia and Desmond embark for Garonlea as an engaged couple seems to last miles and miles. While anachronisms may lurk in this scene, the physical layout does resemble Thomas Henn’s description of the estate he lived on as a child. He states, “the avenue that leads off the main road will be long, winding, perhaps as much as a mile” (*Last Essays* 208). Related closely to the issue of insularity and the nature of the Anglo-Irish estate is the historically ambiguous issue of landlord-tenant relations. Henn concurs with Yeats’ pietistic viewing of history, claiming that “the relationship between landlord and tenant varied, but was on the whole a kindly one, and carried a good deal of respect on either side” (*Lonely Tower* 7). Seamus Deane not only disagrees with this idealization but questions the validity of the Anglo-Irish’s aristocratic stock altogether as a Yeatsian, historical distortion:

Had [Yeats] known a little more about the eighteenth century, he would have recognized that the Protestant Ascendancy was, then and since, a predominantly bourgeois formation. The Anglo-Irish were held in contempt by the Irish-speaking masses as people of no blood. (30)

Kreilkamp echoes Deane’s objections, arguing that Yeats and his fellow revivalists’ recreation of history represents a desire on the part of the colonists to “create a historical mythology that implicitly perpetuates systems of division” (16). It certainly seems clear that in order to ascertain the historical nature of Anglo-Irish life and relations, the Anglo-Irish are perhaps the least reliable source.

Whether or not Anglo-Irish insularity is historically accurate or a mythologizing of history through literature, it certainly holds true in Keane’s world, where characters inside the Ascendancy microcosm display an unquestioning allegiance to their families and estates. This narrow-mindedness is deployed only partially for the sake of irony but primarily to comment on

the psychological nature of being a citizen of the Anglo-Irish colony. Although they rarely occur in Keane's novels, confrontations with the local tenantry or with any kind of foreigner are greeted with an innocent ignorance and fear, hinting at xenophobia³. The geography of the Anglo-Irish, historically ambiguous, seems clearly marked in *The Rising Tide* in the area between the landscapes of Rathglass and Garonlea, and the few voyages outside of this relatively small patch of countryside, to Dublin and London for instance, are so sharply segregated from the normal social life portrayed throughout the novel that these metropolitan excursions seem exotic and alien even to the reader. The irony is that the atrocities that take place inside this imagined "Anglo-Ireland" take on greater proportions than the struggle between the Irish and British nations. As Vera Kreilkamp suggests, "Keane's gentry world appears insulated from history" (182), which is certainly confirmed in one of the most memorable lines of the text: "The war continued much to the inconvenience of social life" (208). This demonstrates at least a surface level awareness of external events on the part of the Anglo-Irish, as well as an implied attempt to blot it from existence⁴.

In most Anglo-Irish novels, a recurring Gothic motif surrounds the Big Houses and the nearby landscape, and Molly Keane's novels are no exception. The ancestors of each estate are often described intricately and typically haunt the current inhabitants, who very often realize throughout the narrative that they too will inevitably become enveloped by the estate's unwieldy and mysterious past. Kreilkamp describes this phenomenon within the Big House genre as the symbolic merging of "the decaying family with its residence" (23). In the extreme cases of Lady

³ Cynthia and Diana in *Rising Tide* take an interest in listening to the natives' strong Irish brogues (37). Moynahan claims that an "attitude of research" toward the native peasantry's linguistic difference in everyday life is a typical characteristic of Anglo-Irish work (39). Molly Keane corroborates this within her interview with Polly Devlin when she comments that "it was a kind of fashion then to see who could imitate the Irish peasant, or who could tell a good story about them" (n. pag.). Although set in a different time period, the closing scenes of *Time After Time* also come to mind as another example.

⁴ The estates of Keane's later comeback novels are even more sheltered from history than those in early works like *The Rising Tide*. The estate of *Good Behaviour*, Temple Alice, seems even more rurally self-reliant and, thus, insulated from the outside world, as seen through the eyes of the first-person narrator, Aroon St. Charles.

Charlotte and Diana, the estates, in fact, become emblematic of the characters and vice versa, so that they are often grouped together in the prose of the narrative like national leaders with their nations (64). In fact, the estates are commonly described as shaping ideas and attitudes, developing sentiments of pride and loyalty similar to feelings of nationalism⁵. Declan Kiberd also comments that “the house epitomizes order and continuity, the values on which it is assumed that [one] will pattern her life; but it exacts a huge tribute from its occupiers, condemning them to cold nights and claustrophobic days” (368).

The houses in *The Rising Tide* are equipped with their own separate systems of cultural rules and values. The world of Garonlea is characterized by tradition, antiquity, and social order. The Gothic motif trickles in and out of the description of Garonlea, a house both alive and dead, a dwelling and tomb. Revealed in these narrations is an agency built into the estate, a social animus capable of creating social change while at the same time being its object. “The oppression” Diana attests, “belongs to the house” (34). Any breaches in normative, Garonlea-like behavior are met with severe punishment, the most tragic example being Enid’s error in judgment. She is at first denied contact with Arthur, an inappropriate suitor, then forced into an unwanted marriage by Lady Charlotte after an unplanned pregnancy. Women, in particular, are held to extraordinarily high standards similar to those required of “a lady in waiting” in an Elizabethan court (8). This behavior, however, is not mandated by Lady Charlotte, but by the higher power and tradition of the estate itself. It is here that the reader is reminded of the intricate, subliminal, and often debilitating relationship between household and consciousness. A sea of influences exists which shapes the thoughts and culture of the people living there as the estate passes from generation to

⁵ Interestingly, both Declan Kiberd in *Inventing Ireland* and Vera Kreilkamp in “The Persistent Pattern” separately refer to this powerlessness as cultural “training.” Kreilkamp specifically references the protagonist in *Good Behaviour*, Keane’s only first-person narrator, and the manner in which her upbringing shapes her personality and behavior. This metaphor resonates with Keane’s military trope used extensively in *The Rising Tide*. This suggests Keane did not look favorably upon her culture’s ability to constantly linger in the minds and actions of the Anglo-Irish, analogizing it to the brainwashing a soldier may face when trained for battle.

generation. The narrator even testifies to the power of Garonlea, stating, “So inexact, so dim is such a gloom, it is hard to say it is the effect of place on character or character on place” (16).

When Cynthia and Desmond purchase Rathglass, however, the culture established there is immediately set apart from Garonlea by an obsession with current fashion and an irreverent brazenness towards tradition, posterity, and formality. There are no ghosts or ancestors listening and casting their shadow on every occurrence. However, one might, perhaps, begin to see traces of the Gothic motif beginning to develop at Rathglass when Cynthia, discovering the loss of Desmond to the war, embarks on a cathartic day of riding and feels the ghostly presence of her lost husband while riding through the trees.

As at Garonlea, there still exists at Rathglass a dominating cultural authority that encourages conformity, and Cynthia, like Lady Charlotte, enforces it mercilessly. The narrator even describes Rathglass in exactly the same terms as Garonlea, as a “small and fashionable court, well-filled with courtiers and ladies-in-waiting, and of these ladies-in-waiting Diana was the chief” (78). If anything, Cynthia is as oppressive a ruler as Lady Charlotte, who at least gave her daughters some modest freedom in selecting and discussing their clothes, which seems to be Cynthia’s most powerful empery. Much like a Queen, Rathglass engenders a “spirit of imitation...so that soon even the moderately independent girls tried to dress like Cynthia, use the same soap and face cream, ride like her, and do their hair for hunting like her” (79).

Before Desmond’s departure for World War I, he invested in well-trained hounds, which attracted a modest retinue of hunters and allowed the estate to function as a large social network. Cynthia uses this network to create a breeding-ground of sorts. She was “unique in the way she could always secure the ones she wanted and if she planned a match she often succeeded in making it” (79). Cynthia’s matchmaking and, in fact, much of her behavior resonates with Margot Backus’ insights in *Gothic Family Romance*. She explains that, historically, there is tremendous pressure on citizens within a colony to procreate in order to maintain the colonial population as a last line of defense. This pressure often results in a backlash, balking the colonial courting

process. Colonial family roles are transformed, often becoming characterized by dishonest, overbearing parents, like Lady Charlotte and Cynthia, and sterilized offspring, like Diana and Simon (4). Backus comments further that this societal pressure only intensifies in times of war (183). Even if Cynthia and her fellow gentry refuse to acknowledge the relevance of World War I to their social life, they can't ignore its effects.

Because of Rathglass' active and expansive riding culture, there is rarely a day that isn't filled attending to meets, hunting, or social networking. The landscape itself becomes the site of social competition and hierarchy based on one's skill and aptitude for hunting and riding. One's ability to jump a wall of a certain size with speed and fluidity represents a pivotal achievement inside Anglo-Irish culture, especially in the culture of Rathglass. This explains why Simon and Susan feel such intense pressure to complete these jumps and are harshly criticized when they avoid them by going through a gate (135). The relationship between Anglo-Irish recreation and the Irish countryside is intriguing but ambiguous in the context of Molly Keane's novels. Apart from the violence of the hunt itself – described in more detail in her earlier novels – collisions and falls are lurking at every bend, haunting the incompetent or neglectful rider. Ellen Wolff addresses the quixotic nature of the Anglo-Irish's connection with the Irish landscape in her discussion of Keane's *Time After Time*, which also expounds on the culture that Cynthia promotes at Rathglass:

Representing the land is a charged project for the Anglo-Irish writer. Metaphorise, romanticize, or idealise the land and the writer risks enacting a colonialist's hopeless alienation from it ... Write realistically, and she risks estrangement from an Anglo-Ireland that ... did not typically acknowledge harsh realities, and often represented place as a metaphor for political power. (55)

The Irish landscape may come off as boring and dull to the Anglo-Irish in Keane's novels, but the countryside is without a doubt more than just a mere hunting ground and riding course for the characters in *The Rising Tide*. It acts as an appropriate metaphor for social power because of the

competition it fosters as well as the image it perpetuates of the Anglo-Irish as an aristocratic, leisure class. It seems no coincidence, particularly in relation to Kreilkamp and O'Toole's comments on Keane's novels, that violence and injury play an integral role in this socially muscular activity. But unlike her hunting romances, *The Rising Tide* depicts the landscape quite ambivalently for many characters. Cynthia, for instance, uses the countryside to escape from the grief of her lost husband, but her ride ends with an eerie confrontation with Desmond's spirit. Simon and Susan possess the greatest anxiety towards the Irish landscape of any of Keane's characters. For Simon, "[The fields] were places that you had to get out of, that you were inexorably carried over" (129). Their trepidation and resentment of riding culture, in fact, indicates early on the disparities already germinating between the two generations.

All in all, the space between the domains of Garonlea and Rathglass is nothing short of a militarized zone. As discussed, the polarizing nature of these estates affects each character in vastly different ways. Therefore, an examination of each character's connection to his or her surroundings is essential for understanding the strange and often comedic behavior witnessed in *The Rising Tide* starting with Diana, a daughter of Garonlea and one of the protagonists of the novel. Diana finds life at Garonlea as oppressive as a Gothic nunnery. She immediately latches on to Cynthia as a means of escaping from the boring routine and haunting atmosphere of Garonlea, essentially becoming a refugee at Rathglass, adopting all of its culture and style. Unable to escape the maternal tyranny she was raised under, Diana is a character who lacks any kind of fortitude or leadership capability as the narrator tells us from the beginning: "Strange the lack of confidence in that child. Sad for her. A pity" (10). She is the colonial refugee, unhappy in the old landscape, estranged in her new one, caught in a vague, ethereal elsewhere, barely conscious of her surroundings: "Two extremes, met, leaving [Diana] somewhere suspended in a sort of mental mid-air" (95). Rejecting the imposed culture of Garonlea and unable to adapt socially to her new environment at Rathglass, Diana is paralyzed in a geographical quagmire. The narrator reinforces

Diana's status as a powerless receptacle of cultural influence when she describes her as utterly "contextual and [one] in whom the surrounding world is concentrated" (43).

Eventually, Diana secures her escape from Garonlea and becomes Cynthia's chief "lady" at Rathglass. From this point on, she is able to look back on her days at Garonlea and scorn her mother, especially during Lady Charlotte's dying days, when "the last tyrannies possible... were taken out of her" (142). She describes her mother in vague, irreverent terms as a "wooly, futile shadow," diminishing, at least in Diana's mind, the power her mother once had (143). She is constantly aware, however, of the impermanence of Rathglass, her sanctuary, and dreads the eventual return to her native prison, Garonlea.

Lady Charlotte's death and funeral are precursors to Diana's return to Garonlea. She greets the event intensely, reacting emotionally to confronting of her new home and the sorrowful memories it recalls for her. Most of all, Diana is unnerved by death (a change of state analogous to and equally disturbing as a change of estate) and because of her awkward behavior she is commanded by Cynthia to return to Rathglass after Lady Charlotte's funeral:

She hurried back to Rathglass now, and when she was over the bridge took deep breaths of village air and avenue air and sweet, airy breath of flowers in the hall. She stood breathing it in, waiting for Rathglass to heal the sickness of Garonlea within her. . . She waited another long moment, almost as though in an embrace, as if this was a lover's breath, this warm, light smell of flowers and air. (154)

Her homecoming to Rathglass is characterized by a fixation with the mystical or subconscious elements of place, as she endows the estate with healing properties. As we will see with Simon, another character largely, but not wholly asexual, Diana's affection for the physical house seems

eerie and perverse, as the narrator suggests she has developed a sexual intimacy with the estate itself⁶.

Finally, Diana's story can be interpreted as an allegory of the Anglo-Irish themselves. Diana persistently attempts to reposition and legitimize herself in a foreign land, Rathglass, to cope with a traumatic upbringing at Garonlea, which she constantly seeks to repress⁷. Also, Diana's sole creative outlet, her gardens at Rathglass, blossoms only shortly before her departure for Garonlea is assured. Julian Moynahan recognizes the paradox of Ascendancy culture and literature which, like Faulkner's agrarian South, "flowers just when the social formation producing it enters a phase of contraction and decline" (9). The return to Garonlea marks Diana's cultural decline. As she looks on her garden for the last time, she worries that the scent of the lilies "would haunt her with her present fear and unhappiness" (156).

Although her part in the novel is brief, Enid receives the worst sentence from Anglo-Irish custom. Enid is the more emotional McGrath daughter, largely unaware of the regulatory social code operating around her. This ignorance climaxes with her romantic entanglement with Arthur, an unsuitable match for Enid socially and financially. When Lady Charlotte forbids her from communicating with him, effectively ending the relationship, Enid becomes disconsolate. The overt emotional reaction Enid displays places her outside of the prevalent cultural norms and, as

⁶ It may not be coincidental that this sexual kinship is created between the only two potentially homosexual characters in *The Rising Tide*. Mary Breen examines the sexuality of Keane's protagonists in "The Representation of Sexuality in Molly Keane's Novels." She examines Keane's numerous sexually marginalized women like Aroon in *Good Behaviour* as well as the ambiguously portrayed same-sex relationships in the same novel and in *Devoted Ladies*. On the other, heterosexual extreme, the "undesirable single woman" is certainly present in *Rising Tide* with characters such as Diana and Susan. As Keane phrased it in her interview with Polly Devlin, the secluded "nunnery" existence of some of her friends and family was something she struggled to "fight herself free of" (n. pag.).

⁷ Diana's struggle with the classic anxiety of a culturally hybridized state is fascinating to parallel with Moynahan's *Anglo-Irish: The Literary Imagination in a Hyphenated Culture*, which discusses the inextricability of the two entangled cultures of England and Ireland. The possible allegorical relationships between Rathglass and Garonlea and these nations, respectively, would be interesting to investigate further. Furthermore, the mirroring process that develops between Lady Charlotte and Cynthia reverberates with Declan Kiberd's *Inventing Ireland*, where Kiberd attributes to early Anglo-Irish relations a palpable apprehension based on similarity rather than distinction.

evidence of this separation, arouses shock and confusion in her sisters. Hearing Enid's tears, Diana feels "a slap at her own extreme repression too" (65).

Enid's attempted suicide is one of the few acts of actual violence committed in the novel and is greeted initially with Keanian satire. One must, however, look past the comedic presentation and examine the scene from a deeper literary perspective. The narrator remarks on the behavioral response of Enid's sisters, stating that "tremendous inner confusion and upheaval masked by a splendid show of decorum followed the discovery of Enid's frustrated attempt at suicide" (59). This passage represents the ambivalent nature of Keane's prose, confusing the modern reader with a fluffy comment about a "splendid" display of social etiquette. Layered over a seriously traumatic and dysfunctional event, the remark suggests that the social response to a suicide attempt is much more important socially than the attempt itself. This phenomenon arises frequently when characters recognize a malfunctioning social situation, repress the "inner confusion" which naturally arises, and instead respond with a cold, though appropriate pleasantry. Lady Charlotte's reaction, however, complicates the scene even further, when for the first and only time in the novel she is compelled to comfort her daughter in an affectionate, maternal embrace (62).

Although it is easy to position Lady Charlotte as the villain of the text, it is arguable that Lady Charlotte is as powerless as any other character in the novel because of the imposed rule of Garonlea and Anglo-Irish culture. She is, rather, a lifeless enforcer of a tradition handed down to her through a long line of predecessors. The complicated, almost bureaucratic movements and routines of the household are not at all surprising or strange to the characters, including Lady Charlotte herself. For instance, when Lady Charlotte discovers Enid's improper involvement with Arthur, she unconsciously follows a mysterious protocol when she plans a family "court" and sends a message to Enid to attend. During this ceremony, incidentally, the ghosts of past generations are mentioned as if they too preside over it, "lean[ing] a little closer to this trouble and tension" (46). When Enid becomes pregnant by Arthur, Lady Charlotte's strategy changes.

Enid begs Lady Charlotte not to force her to marry Arthur, to which she replies, “‘my dear Enid, you have left very little choice in the matter either to me or yourself’” (63). A hidden hierarchy of power takes control of the situation, superseding Lady Charlotte as matriarch and securing Enid in the position of least control.

Lady Charlotte is also governed by the overarching social order of Anglo-Irish culture, which demands the family appear socially balanced at all times. This explains why Cynthia and Charlotte, normally staunch opponents in all matters, agree upon the inexorability of Enid’s situation. In a conversation Lady Charlotte has with a girlfriend discussing Violet McGrath’s marriage, the prospect of marriage comes off as a formal and often powerless situation for the potential wife. Their discussion about breaking the news of the forthcoming marriage to their daughters sounds more like a conversation a doctor would have letting a patient down easy after diagnosing a disease, not the joyous conversation one imagines:

“The poor child was really upset.” [Lady Charlotte] told a very intimate friend later, “although I veiled it all as much as possible.”

The intimate girl-friend replied with forgivable maternal pride, “When I told Little Mabel I saw to it that she had a good breakfast first, but even so she cried so dreadfully, I thought we should never get her dressed or to church. Such innocence seems very beautiful to me.” (64)

“Innocence”, when used by the older generation, seems to be a term carrying the connotation of youthful ignorance in the face of a non-negotiable social code.

Lady Charlotte’s relief over the death of Enid’s child is also barbaric, particularly in the way the narrator phrases it when she states that “a dead, premature baby was so much simpler to explain to her friends than a hearty live one” (72). But this barbarism reflects more on the larger social values operating around Lady Charlotte, values which deemed a child born out of wedlock a supreme disaster. Lady Charlotte’s powerlessness crystallizes with the rise of Rathglass and the loss of her daughters to marriage or defection. As the narrator tells us, “Charlotte and Ambrose

[her husband] still reigned at Garonlea,” but this period of tranquility would come to an end once Cynthia is introduced as the “Rebel Queen” (73).

Cynthia’s early acceptance into the world of Garonlea introduces a foreign and disruptive element to the prevalent culture and attitude. Consequently, it is not too long before a nasty confrontation is triggered when Diana asks Cynthia to go for a walk during teatime, which Lady Charlotte interprets as an act of fealty towards Cynthia. In an unprecedented act of defiance, Cynthia disobeys Charlotte’s commands to stay for tea. Relatively speaking, the incident is rather trivial, but it is described in regal language. The narrator attends to Lady Charlotte’s movements the way a historian would a King or Queen, and the moment itself is given historical significance. As the narrator puts it, Lady Charlotte “looked up from the note she was writing . . . paused a second, raised pen in hand, and in that second in that room streaked by long moted beams of sun, she seemed to swell with strange arrogance among those swords of sunlight” (29). This scene above all others positions *The Rising Tide* not as a satirical reduction, but an epic record of Ascendancy culture. In the context of Garonlea’s history the moment is significant since all of the McGrath ancestors are watching and all of the characters involved are subsequently changed significantly. Throughout the rest of the novel, Diana is so “powerlessly” connected to Cynthia as to suggest to some scholars a homosexual relationship, and Cynthia is from that point on mysteriously and impulsively attracted to the power of Garonlea (30)⁸. There are also two ironies present in this scene: the irony of Diana’s escaping from one governess simply to fall into the hands of another, and the irony of the phallic imagery of sword and pen juxtaposed with the various feminine characters clashing with one another.

After the incident, Cynthia is intent on recapturing Garonlea from Lady Charlotte, subduing its local culture and values, and supplanting it with her own. Garonlea represents the old regime and, coinciding with Jazz Age values of “make it new,” Cynthia feels emboldened not

⁸ Mary Breen discusses the potential homosexual relationship that develops between Cynthia and Diana in her essay “The Representation of Sexuality in Molly Keane’s Novels.”

only to “lay the ghosts,” but to erase them from memory. Cynthia comes off as rapacious and Machiavellian when she confronts the challenge of Garonlea’s “occupation” (144). Immediately upon entering the household, Cynthia feels a latent “hostility” to the air of Garonlea: “she felt the oldest, most inward character of a place must yield to her if she should determine to change it. And she was defiant about changing Garonlea” (144). Cynthia is blatantly dividing and conquering, seeking out the daughters individually and attempting to recruit them. The following paragraph is most revealing of Cynthia’s militaristic social engagement with the women of Garonlea: “Violet was captured too with talk of clothes and bridesmaids’ dresses all planned for Violet. She was easily capturable and except for her beauty unimportant. But still Cynthia meant to have her” (35). Cynthia’s reaction to Enid’s scandal is how best to use it to her advantage: “Enid was neither attractive to her nor useful, so she let her be” (72).

The connections between Cynthia and the “Machiavellian” Leda from Keane’s 1984 novel *Time After Time* are surprising, like portraits of two Queens drawn in two different time periods⁹. Although *Time After Time* is set in a later, post-World War II time period, Leda is an older character, who, like Cynthia, becomes a remnant of an obsolete culture. Both characters use gossip and flattery tactically to gain allegiance and to coax valuable information from their subjects in order to find their places in society. Even when discussing the ingredients of a cake, Leda feels “exhilarated by the change of tactics in the siege of Jasper,” Jasper being the cook and primary head of the family’s day-to-day operations (156). She attempts to subtly poison his sisters against him in her effort to become a permanent guest of the house. The presence of this military language in one of Keane’s later works, considered to be one of her darkest satires, suggests that characters like Cynthia, “Demonic” females who are powerless in their lust for power, exist in all stages of Keane’s career after *The Rising Tide* and should be analyzed carefully and not dismissed as simply farcical.

⁹ Ellen Wolff describes Leda as “Machiavellian” in her article “Molly Keane’s *Time After Time*” (53).

In many ways, the rearing habits of Cynthia represent a civilized, psychological barbarism similar to the eugenics used by bronze-age tribes who inspected their newborns, refusing any defective children the right to life. As Heather Ingman points out, “In Keane’s hostile mother-daughter stories, clumsy, oversized daughters become victims of mothers who are perfectly adapted to their society’s view of females as delicate, passive and pretty” (77). Cynthia, for instance, inspects Susan’s body very carefully, critiquing the dimensions of her shoulders as too unladylike. Her cruel, oppressive treatment of her children is reflective of the culture she helped shape and the broader social values of the Anglo-Irish. Kreilkamp also discusses Anglo-Irish children in twentieth-century fiction as the “most available and satisfactory victims for the power hungry” (185). Cynthia objectifies her children as Lady Charlotte does her daughters as extensions of herself and her estate. This explains why both dowagers feel compelled to lie about their children when they stray from normative social behaviors, particularly, in Cynthia’s case, in matters of riding and recreation. Like the Queen’s ladies-in-waiting, they must reflect their matrons as paragons of cultural values and beliefs. It is the culture, however, that acts on Cynthia in as restricting and influential a manner as its preceding culture acted on Lady Charlotte. As O’Toole points out, “all the cruel women of the Big House are acting as society approves, which is what makes them frightening” (126).

The children begin to develop their own social identities, however, outside the structure of Rathglass culture when David Colebrook is invited on a ride at Rathglass, where he meets the family and is almost killed by a collision with Simon’s pony. Cynthia and David become romantically involved, challenging each other in ways they aren’t accustomed to. Being a master horseman in England, David gains immediate cultural capital in the Rathglass domain, which allows him to suggest to Cynthia to ride the children’s ponies, displacing her social and parental authority. Cynthia shudders at the idea of her children seeing her ride one of their ponies, potentially failing to jump a small obstacle, and appearing vulnerable in her own milieu. This moment is a defining one similar to the moment when Cynthia and Diana defy Lady Charlotte for

the first time. Both of these moments, incidentally, mark the decline of the older generation and the rise of a newer regime.

Although the battle for social control in the novel is waged primarily by mothers, the paternal characters of Ascendancy literature are also subject to the stringent emotional decorum of the Anglo-Irish and are often marginalized in family affairs. In her chapter on Molly Keane in *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House*, Kreilkamp comments that “Keane’s fiction suggests that as Anglo-Irish power erodes, gender identities shift; the formerly submissive partner within the Big House marriage learns to mimic and undermine the dominant male role” (184). She elaborates further that, “fathers and husbands in Keane’s fiction are ciphers, shadowy figures who have abdicated any role in governance of family, household, or country and whose neglect of their children works itself out as a passive tolerance of maternal brutalities” (186). This certainly holds true with Ambrose McGrath, more so than any other male character in Keane’s canon. Ambrose is the patriarch of Garonlea estate, although you could not tell from his behavior. His blind obedience to Lady Charlotte, even when compelled to disagree with his wife, parallels the typical socially repressed and effeminate father figure of Big House novels. Despite being a peripheral character on the social battlefield, Ambrose does wage his own “enfeebled war against the elders and thistles on the place, and never faltered in devoted deference to his wife, although he differed from her wordlessly in those sturdier wars which she waged” (73). By this account, Ambrose exists as a passive, barely conscious bystander in the drama that unfolds, but, by sheer fact of his maleness, he remains an undeniably crucial piece in the game. Like Diana, Ambrose distracts himself with the labor of gardening, even at the risk of his own personal health. Losing himself in a frivolous battle, which also involves uprooting older (elder?) networks, Ambrose and his “war,” when juxtaposed with the wars of Cynthia and Lady Charlotte, trivializes the obsessive desire for social control displayed by many of Keane’s female characters. Because Ambrose eventually dies from over-exertion while gardening, his character also suggests that Cynthia’s

enterprise at Garonlea, “pull[ing] the whole place up by its roots,” is ultimately a futile and damning one (145).

Unbeknownst to Ambrose, the inheritance of the Garonlea property relies on his health, which Lady Charlotte “for this as much as any reason” watches with an attentive eye (76). When Ambrose finally dies, such is the ego of Lady Charlotte that she sees his death as a “traitorous” act, as if dying were some kind of defection or rebellion against her, allowing possession of the house to pass to Simon and, by proxy, Cynthia (117). Ambrose exposes an irony of Anglo-Irish culture which allows women to enforce and regulate norms and values in a society that financially marginalizes them. It is no wonder, then, that Anglo-Irish women cultivate such a strong interest in and devotion to the process of courtship, marriage, and child-rearing. Enid’s scandal with Arthur illustrates the dangerous complexity an Anglo-Irish woman faces when finding a mate. Since women were only allowed property rights when no male heir existed, women became dependent on males and on marriage as a shared, but not necessarily guaranteed, link in the family inheritance. Elizabeth Grubgeld explains that, “numerous women resented their inability to inherit entailed property and openly protested the traditions that led to the surrender of the family house to some distant male relative” (47). Marriage, with a suitable husband, of course, represented livelihood, a change in status, and also a change in state of mind¹⁰.

Simon is also a unique character in the context of social dynamics and power struggles. He is immediately set apart from the culture of Cynthia, and this disparity transforms into a role reversal as Cynthia in her old age becomes obsolete. Ultimately, Simon is the one who has to corral and defend Cynthia’s outdated habits, and modernize (again) the social atmosphere of Garonlea. Simon possesses numerous feminine traits and hobbies. Although there is evidence to suspect Simon is homosexual, there is even more evidence that he, like Diana, exhibits a sexual

¹⁰ The words “married” and “engaged” in *Rising Tide* lose the legality we are used to, but become adjectives describing behavior or mood, even allowing women a socially acceptable emotional outlet: “Ecstasy and severe strain were permissible and considered both romantical and seemly under the auspices of that magic word – Engaged” (75).

relationship with the household. Unlike other males in the novel, Simon is very involved with his culture's style and fashion, an area previously dominated by Cynthia, suggesting Simon is her successor.

Simon inherits a love of parties from his mother but finds Cynthia's raucous parties boorish and crude. As a back-handed insult to Cynthia, Simon arranges what we would call a retro party, ushering in the new tide of culture by mocking and hyperbolizing its antecedent. The narrator comments that Simon, "had never before to-night felt Garonlea to be his own. Now he held a strange power over it, or rather with it. The house itself was his mate and equal in power" (309). For the first time Simon is described in similar, regal terminology, enraptured in a power-driven state similar to Cynthia and Lady Charlotte's campaigns, but with a noticeable sexual charge. It seems clear in this passage that the line dividing person and estate is increasingly fuzzy, especially when a sexual dimension is added. Garonlea is an extension of Simon, not simply a thing to be conquered but a tool or resource at his disposal to conquer.

Behind all of the narrative's drama, Keane's narrator is busy at work, constructing innuendoes behind the characters and the agencies of the estates. It is often very hard to position Keane's third-person, omniscient narrators inside of the social microcosm which they construct. In *The Rising Tide* the narrator establishes this ambiguity from the beginning of the text: "1901 and 2 and 3 and up to '14 we can feel about only very dimly...But we can't feel about those years really. Not in the way we feel about the War. There we are conscious" (5). By all accounts, this narrator seems very much concerned with the affairs of the outer world, but the passage is quite misleading as the narrator hastily enters into the trivial, leisurely world of Garonlea and rarely leaves it. The narrator is undoubtedly invested in the characters and the culture, proffering her own revival of a lost, but adored culture, a "definite period" as she calls it (26). The narrator is desperate to describe in painstaking detail the feelings of isolation accompanying the repressed Ascendancy culture as if compensating for the characters' lack of voice. The narrator's tone and language enable the reader to develop an understanding of the intense psychological significance

of each social barb. In a few instances, in fact, the narrator herself wishes to cast her own judgments on the characters, seeing the calamities and injustices that take place and deriding them, no longer an innocent bystander. Here we see the narrator expressing a bitter hatred towards Lady Charlotte: “God should have chastened Lady Charlotte with one malformed or unsatisfactory child” (8). Whether or not this comfort would have been worth the inevitable suffering and torment this child would have experienced at Lady Charlotte’s hands is another argument.

Put simply, the narrator is to blame for the warlike atmosphere in the novel by framing the two dowagers as competing Queens in a constant state of upheaval. By describing the dramas of the text in military language, the narrator fundamentally transforms the frivolities of the characters into epochal events, turning a trivial reality into a powerful history. On a larger scale, the narrator plays the classic part of Anglo-Irish dowager herself by minimizing all events occurring outside the bubble of the Protestant Gentry even in the face of “inconvenient” World and Civil Wars. The narrator never seems to falter in her allegiance to the Irish Ascendancy, even if, at times, she slyly mocks them.

In the closing scenes of *The Rising Tide*, we see the mind and spirit of a social warrior finally commit to rest. The ironic instability looming underneath this ambiguous ending is that Cynthia still exists as a marginal, persecuted character in the social cosmos of the novel. Apart from her husband’s death, Cynthia never once tastes the pangs of real war, the bitterness of poverty, or the strife of religious or political persecution. As the empire she created begins to crumble around her, she is cast more and more as a hardened widow and exile whose scarred mind and body finally have become obsolescent. Cynthia’s only comfort by the end, and indeed our only comfort as readers, is the mutually supportive, albeit sterile relationship between Diana and Cynthia as they abandon Garonlea to return to the once halcyon estate at Rathglass.

Cynthia and Lady Charlotte are just two examples of the paralysis and isolation which haunt every level of the social hierarchy in *The Rising Tide*. While Keane’s style and intention

would lean closer towards the sardonic and farcical over the course of her career, this novel remains a frightening, yet, somehow, amusing exposé of the psychological and emotional state of the Anglo-Irish. Inheriting this world from birth, the characters are powerless victims inside a repressive system of tradition and decorum entangled in the history of the houses and landscape. The narrator's own awareness of this tragic existence crystallizes in one of the novel's bitterest passages:

The level of sadness and propriety was so secure. There would never be a break or a change in this. No matter what happened to the McGraths who lived at Garonlea – what sadness overtook them, happiness, adventure or heart-break, all was finally subdued to the pattern of Garonlea . . . It would always be the same, it always had been. (66)

Sadness and propriety in Anglo-Irish novels almost always appear synonymous. The grim isolation recognized by the narrator in this excerpt, like that described in so many other haunting passages in *The Rising Tide*, is always set in an inescapable and crowded social reality. It is no wonder, then, that Keane and so many other Anglo-Irish authors greeted this beautiful disaster with the only defenses they could muster, wit and satire.

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