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An Hibernian Tale – Representations of Identity in the Irish Big House Novel

Ludvig Bertilsson
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Supervisor: Annika Lindskog

Abstract

The genre of the Irish “Big House” novel is one deeply entrenched in historical context. To be unaware of the setting, and the significance of identity within it, lessens the understanding and impact of character, motivations, and conflict in the text. This essay discusses and analyses displays of identity through language, subtext, and history in two novels in the Big House genre: *Castle Rackrent: An Hibernian Tale* by Maria Edgeworth, published in 1800, and *The Real Charlotte* from 1894 written by the duo Somerville and Ross. Clashing identities run throughout the hearts of these novels, those of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and the Irish peasantry. Five topics emerge concerning the historical and societal factors vital in understanding how these identities are represented on and off the page: the self-destructing nature of the gentry, the development of social climbers, heteroglossia, subtextual challenge to the social order, and relevant political changes of the time. Language and historical context are fundamental to the portrayal of identity in these novels, and exploring these perspectives grants an understanding of the social commentary inherent in them.

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1. Introduction

The topic of the Big House in Irish literature and cultural consciousness has a long-standing tradition, originally emerging from historical circumstance with the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland in the 12th century. After this conquest, the nominal "Big Houses" were erected, large estates establishing and representing English colonialist rule, military presence, and identity in Ireland. These houses, although not as elegant or large as continental or English seats of power, were built to be visibly impressive in comparison with the smaller cottages of the land (Genet 15). Through this a new structure in the societal hierarchy was introduced, with more and more land being accumulated by the Anglo-Norman and Anglo-Irish Ascendency. This power balance entered the literary world in the 19th century, with one of the works analysed here, Maria Edgeworth's *Castle Rackrent: An Hibernian Tale* (1800). Since *Castle Rackrent* many other Irish novels has dealt with the social hierarchies and realities of British-occupied Ireland, creating the genre of Big House novels. As the Big House is quite a small and inherently national genre, it has become a subject tied very closely to cultural and historical studies.

Previous research conducted regarding Big House fiction has repeatedly stated the significance of the genre in relation to Irish collective memory, identity, and culture. Further literary examination, along with conducting analysis of historical identities reflected in the texts, broaden the understanding of the works and the genre itself. Additional knowledge of Big House literature and of its relevance to social hierarchies and historical fact is of great importance to understand the genre, and this paper presents an analysis of the differing portrayals of the underlying social structures prominent within these novels. The perspective of this essay deals with the social structure, tied to the use of social codes, subtext, and localised language and dialects, echoes historical circumstance, and helps to acquire further knowledge of the genre though this form of analysis.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how identities are presented and the difference between cultural belonging in two works, widely regarded as characteristic examples of the genre. These are *Castle Rackrent: An Hibernian Tale* by Maria Edgeworth, and *The Real Charlotte* (1894) written by the literary duo Edith Somerville and Violet Martin under the

penname Somerville and Ross. Through the examination of these works, this study shows that social structure and historical context have a large impact on the genre, and it identifies topics and themes tying these together. The nuances found will complement previous research in the field, while offering new perspectives on the collective themes found within the texts, focusing on the portrayals of identity.

This essay is divided into four sections, each highlighting important aspects of the analysis and aims of the study. The coming section will examine the background, introduce the theoretical basis of this investigation, previous research, and historical context, providing an important framework to the setting of the primary sources and the issues that they deal with. In the next section the results of the investigation will be presented through separate examinations of the novels in relationship to their representation of identity tied to historical context presented in the previous section. The significance of the Big House itself will also be introduced as a topic of analysis, and what it means for the portrayal of cultural belonging and class structures tied to land ownership. These presentations of results will deal with each one of the primary texts and their depictions of topics regarding the scope of this study. Perspectives found through this breakdown will later be combined through analysis and discussion where a deeper contextual examination will take place, relating the texts to historical and societal factors discussed previously, such as land control and power structures. This discussion is structured after the topics found in the previous section.

2. Background

To understand the impact that the Big House has on Irish literature and the genre that bears its name, an explanation of the historical background is required to contextualise the settings, characters, and plots of these novels. Furthermore, this section will account the theoretical approach of this essay and how it will be applied in the later discussion and analysis. Finally, there will be a segment discussing previous criticism tied to identities and power structures concerning the novels.

2.1 Historical Context

From a historical perspective, the establishing of the Big House started in the 12th century along with the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland and has since stood as a symbol of English rule and class separation between the Anglo-Irish and native Irish population (Genet 15-16). This invasion is also commonly called the "Strongbow invasion" after the nickname of the Welsh Anglo-Norman Richard of Clare, a military leader and conqueror who played a large role in the invasion, taking cities like Waterford and Dublin between 1170 and 1171. In 1171 the King of England, Henry II, joined the invasion with the blessing of the Pope and took control over the island, overthrew the Irish Church, and introduced a new system of rule under royal control. Castles and large homesteads were built for the new English settlers, representing the might and rule of the English crown and Anglo-Norman control, eventually emanating in a feudal system of townships and estates with their own administrations and courts under English law (Black 56-57).

The Protestant Reformation of the English Church and society at large, spearheaded by Henry VIII, was met with strong opposition when attempted to be applied in Ireland. A rebellion in 1534 tried to overthrow the Crown's overlordship of the island and sought to install either the Pope or the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V as the ruler. This rebellion was rapidly defeated, however, and Henry VIII was in 1537 officially announced as the supreme head of the Irish Church (Black 114). The support of the general population towards the new reforms were nevertheless still low, and while the Anglo-Norman Ascendency were pushed towards Protestant reform, most of the Irish peasantry chose to keep their Catholic faith. In the coming century English landlords and property owners expedited the process of gaining control over the island by ousting Gaelic landowners through military intervention, which created a further rift between the two groups, which emanated in the start of the Desmond rebellion in the 1580's. Here the Catholic forces, backed by the Spanish Crown, once again sought to expel English rule but was defeated in 1603, allowing the English to cement control over the entire island for the first time. What followed was further dispossession of land from Irish landowners into the hands of English and Scottish Protestant settlers (Black 126-128).

The division between colonisers and native population emanated into a crisis named the Penal Era, a time when a series of discriminatory laws were passed, starting in 1695 and ending about 60 years later in 1756, which distanced the civil rights between the Protestant minority

and Catholic majority, heavily disenfranchising the latter. One of the most important laws in relation to land ownership came into effect in 1704, when Catholics were forbidden to acquire more land, lost their vote, and larger Catholic-owned estates had to be turned over to Protestants (Pakenham 136). During this period there was a clear divide in laws and society based on religious discrimination, mixed marriages between Protestants and Catholics were outlawed (Black 161), and the designation of the identity of "Irish" became synonymous with "papist" (Bishop 1-2). At the beginning of the 18th century the older, now almost dilapidated, fortresses and tower houses left after the invasion were being turned into country houses and estates and used by the land-owning protected class of English-descended protestants (Pakenham 12-13), and the Big House thus kept standing as a symbol British supremacy over the island and the Irish population. In the 17th and 18th century, Catholic land ownership in Ireland fell from 59 per cent in 1641 to 5 per cent in 1778 (Black 160) because of Penal Era legislation.

In the coming centuries resentments towards Protestant landowners would increase after the Act of Union in 1800 which entirely dissolved the Irish Parliament, the subsequent famine, and land shortages due to an ever-increasing population. In the late 1800's a political association called The Land League started forming, stemming from the unjust policies in place regarding land ownership. The Land League was a social and economic movement whose main goal was to transfer the power inherent in the system from landlords to tenants by cooperation and opposition towards institutional inequalities (McLaughlin 81). This eventually led to several Land Acts being enacted from 1881 to 1903 to appeal to farmers, as well as fearing rebellion and Fenian acts of terrorism (Black 237), which converted the structure from an exploitative semi-feudal tenancy system to allowing farmers to own the land on which they worked (Johnson 553). These Land Acts stemmed from an ever-growing resistance from the Catholic majority regarding how the laws of land ownership had been implemented across the country in the past centuries, coupled with the harrowing effects of the Great Famine in the 1840's, a catastrophe brought on by the results of a fungal disease of the potato crop, which was a large portion of the diet in Ireland at the time. The population decline during the period due to this famine and subsequent emigration is reported to have been around 20 %, leading to massive economic regression during the 19th century (Crawford 2002).

The works examined in this thesis are set in the 18th and 19th centuries respectively, *Castle Rackrent* taking place during a span of time when Penal Laws were enacted, and *The Real Charlotte* being set at the end of this period, with massive societal change on the horizon due to The Land League and Land Acts. A considerable political change can be observed over the 19th century, with the previously mentioned Great Famine, Land Acts, and unrest among the population eventually leading to a transformation of the structure of land ownership. *Castle Rackrent* and *The Real Charlotte* both embody the downfall of the Protestant gentry and the formation of a Catholic middle class in Ireland through the actions of their characters, setting, and subtext. The former follows Thady, an Irish Catholic servant to the Rackrent family, spectator to its downfall, and the eventual rise in station of his son Jason. The latter tells the story of Charlotte, a scheming individual willing to lie, cheat, and steal to get what she wants, which is land, power, and station, and the Dysart family, part of the Anglo-Irish Ascendency, and their inability to function as landowners.

2.2 Theoretical Framework – Heteroglossia and Identity

In the coming analysis in this essay there are a few vital concepts that will aid the understanding of the examined works, which will be explained here in this section. These are heteroglossia, as described by literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, and the concept of national identity from the social structuralist perspective of Émile Durkheim.

2.2.1 Irish National Identity

To examine the identities and social belongings in *Castle Rackrent* and *The Real Charlotte,* a definition of identity as a concept will have to be specified and detailed to then be analysed. This essay uses the definition of French philosopher Émile Durkheim, presented by sociologist James Dingley who relates it to the Irish identity. Durkheim placed a great deal of importance on religion and its ties to collective identity. The very social aspect of society, in this view, was to be found in religion and it became thus a symbolic representation of community. He does not dismiss any religion as true or false, but rather states that they all are true due to being reflections of something very real, namely society and nation. Social existence is based on shared ceremonies and rituals of any collective, creating what Durkheim would call knowledge, which is structures of thought that both influences and is influenced by social order, consciousness, and a communal morality (Dingley 33-37).

Due to discriminatory laws against Irish Catholics and subsequent rebellions, a rift had been formed in the national cultural identity of the island, which can be felt throughout both *Castle* Rackrent and *The Real Charlotte*. Protestant and Catholic had been separated by law and identity, as it is defined by Durkheim, through a religious and class-based divide system which through political power favoured one side over the other. In this disunion these two identities were formed, that of the Anglo-Irish Protestant and the Irish Catholic, both based on shared knowledge, religion, and community (Dingley 151-155).

Around the 1840's, right before the Great Famine, nationalist romanticism inserted itself into the Gaelic-Irish, Catholic identity. Taking inspiration from the German Romantics, efforts such as "Young Ireland", a political and cultural movement for Irish independence, sought to create a nationalist revival in Irish arts and literature through the rejection of Anglicised culture (Dingley 141-143). Manifestation of identity was, from this point of view, demonstrated through differences in language and dialect, allowing for distinctions in how cultural character was expressed in Irish literature (Dingley 139-141).

2.2.2 Heteroglossia

The Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay *Discourse in the Novel* (1934) formulated the concept of heteroglossia, a term to explain the use of different social voicings and varieties in languages within text, primarily written in the novelistic style. This theory applies to the works examined in this essay, which allow disenfranchised voices to be heard in their own dialect and manner of speech, creating a contrast between any stylised voice and the influence between "high society" and "proper speech" (Bakhtin 382-384). Using different kinds of speech in a work of fiction reflects the real-world stylistic differences within language and dialects and allows the reader to develop an understanding of social conflict and relationships in the text (Ivanov 100). Heteroglossia, as a term and concept, is used to further understand and explain sociolinguistic diversity and its conceptualisation within the novel, rather than just being simultaneous use of conflicting voices. The presence of speech difference exemplifies contested, co-existing socio-political points of view through the speaker using non-standard dialect or certain words with associations to an economic class, ethnicity, gender norm, or other identity like the national or religious. It makes the speaker into a social actor within the world through the diversity of speech and social codes (Blackledge and Creese 99-100).

In this essay the concept of heteroglossia will be used to analyse the speech patterns and language use of characters in the novels, primarily Thady and Charlotte, to explore their roles in the text as social actors which can be connected to history and the socio-political conflict in Ireland at the time. The cultural belonging of voices in fiction can be indicative of dominant and non-dominant identities within a society or nation (Jaffe et al. 135-136), and so heteroglossia will help to explain how language denotes these identities and their roles on and outside the page.

2.3 Previous Research and Criticism

Previous investigations into the genre of the Big House, as found in works of literary scholars like Vera Kreilkamp in *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (1998), and Jacqueline Genet in *The Big House in Ireland: Reality and Representation* (1991), has recognised the relation between literary text and historical fact. Kreilkamp discuss the social and economic dimensions within the genre, and the dichotomy between a dominant and non-dominant culture (that of Anglo-Irish and Irish), and how the Big House itself can represent these identities. Genet has argued that the Big House has been a fact in Irish cultural conscience dating back to the twelfth century with the Anglo-Norman invasion and has since then acted as a symbol of imperialism and apartheid relating to the divide between the Irish and English population. However, there are still gaps in knowledge regarding the different depictions of this theme, and of nuances in the relationships depicted in established works of the genre, such as the ties between heteroglossia, identity, and historical context.

Both *Castle Rackrent* and *The Real Charlotte* have been criticised as examples of colonialist texts. One example of such criticism comes from scholar David Martin, who in his article The "Castle Rackrent" of Somerville and Ross: A Tragic "Colonial" Tale?" (1982) discusses Maria Edgeworth, as well as Somerville and Ross, regarding their colonial mindset in their portrayals of the conflict between the Anglo-Irish and Irish characters in their novels. Martin states,

> Thus one can say that Somervile and Ross are, like Maria Edgeworth, colonial writers. Their values, standards and outlook are English, undoubtedly coloured by the Irish scene and Irish habits. … as can be seen from their fiction, the passion and ideology which informed separatism from England, the spirit of

> Republican Nationalism, was so far outside their sympathies that they could not even grasp the actual nature of the conflict which was to destroy their class. (Martin 53)

While it is true that under the lens of postcolonialism, Edgeworth, as well as the partnership between Somerville and Ross, could both be construed as colonialist writers, it is wholly unfair to remove them from their place among Irish writers. Their legacy of writing about, and establishing, the Big House in Irish literary standard helps us to understand the power structures of 18th and 19th century Ireland. Even though their personal social standing made them unable to harshly criticise a system which they benefitted from, their writing, as exemplified by these novels, still feature themes of unjust rule and unqualified rulers. What the analysis in this essay will show is that both texts do not shy away from expressing the political realities of their time, but rather lets the readers infer their own meaning behind the actions and words of the characters while retaining the voice of the disenfranchised.

3. Parsing Topics and Themes

3.1 The Symbolic Value of the Big House

This section details an account of the main themes of the novels, along with shorter summaries and historical perspectives where a few topics will emerge regarding similarities and differences in the texts, like the Big Houses of both, the titular Castle Rackrent and the object of Charlotte's desire, Gurthnamuckla. Throughout both novels discussed below, *Castle Rackrent* and *The Real Charlotte*, there is an underlying sense of dilapidation of the Big House itself, and with it the failing economic state of the respective families themselves. This is exemplified by these quotes, seen from the perspective of the main characters, Thady and Charlotte:

> – ´Dear Ma'am, and what's the matter? ´, says I. - ´Matter enough, (says she) don't you see my band-box is wet through, and my best bonnet here spoiled, besides my lady's, and by all that rain coming in through that gallery window, that you might have got mended if you'd have any sense, Thady, all the time we were in town in the winter.' (Edgeworth 64)
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> The cart track that led to her house was covered with grass, except for two brown ruts and a narrow footpath that in the centre, and the boughs of the sycamores that grew on either side of it drooped low as if ignoring the possibility of a visitor. The house door remained shut from year's end to year's end, contrary to the usual kindly Irish custom; in fact, its rotten timbers were at once supported and barricaded by a diagonal beam that held them together, and was itself beginning to rot under its shroud of cobwebs. The footpath skirted the duckpond in front of the door, and led round the corner of the house to what had been in the palmy days of Gurthnamuckla the stableyard, and wound through its weedy heaps of dirt to the kitchen door. (Somerville and Ross 41)

The leaky, boarded-up houses of these novels represent the deteriorating of authority in the rule and domination of the Ascendency. This does, however, not remove it as a mark of power and object of desire for Charlotte or Jason, who does not see it as ruined land, but as an indication of a higher status. Old Big Houses, once a symbol of Anglo-Norman supremacy and control, are starting to decline not only in influence and status but physically as well. But towards the end of the stories, they do still represent the empowerment of Irish Catholic identity, which will be discussed later.

3.2 Topics and Themes in *Castle Rackrent: An Hibernian Tale*

Castle Rackrent follows the fictitious memoirs of Thady Quirk, a member of a long line of Irish Catholic servants and butlers to the Rackrent family. Loyal to a fault, he often expresses great regard for the members of the Rackrents, even when they make horrible decisions that often put their fortune, land, and health at risk, making the face value of his account unreliable due to his devotion to the family. His story is told by a fictional narrator and editor who, due to Thady being illiterate, writes down his spoken tale of his life working at Castle Rackrent. The novel briefly begins with the descriptions of the first two Lords of the manor, Sir Patrick, and Sir Murtagh, the latter being especially stern with how he treated the tenants of his land, taking great pleasure in creating lawsuits against everything he saw as a slight against the landlord-tenant laws. After Sir Murtagh had departed childless, the estate went to his brother Sir Kit Stopgap, one of the characters that this analysis focuses on.

The character of Sir Kit can be read as an analogy of the English-led rule of Ireland. At first non-present at the estate, preferring to live in Bath and driving in exorbitant amounts of

money from the estate without being around himself, which he spends gambling. When his son is considering renting farmland, Thady remarks that Sir Kit has no knowledge of the property he receives monetary gain from, stating: “The proposals all went over to the master at Bath, who knowing no more of the land than the child unborn, only having once been out a grousing on it before he went to England…” (Edgeworth 22). Although having an Irish Parliament located in Dublin at the time when this is set, English law and custom was still being forced upon the island along with Penal Era legislation redistributing land to the Anglo-Irish Ascendency and English settlers. Sir Kit is thus representative of the colonial English rule in Ireland, being portrayed as an ungenerous landlord who does not spend time in the country and knows nothing of the land, but still drives in rent at an unreasonable pace and price. When Sir Kit eventually comes to live at Castle Rackrent it is with his new bride, whom he married for her fortune, which is where we start the see the failing economic state of the family, at least from the perspective of Thady. Thady himself has no love for his new lady of the house, mostly on the count of her Jewish origins, thinking her a “heretic” and “Nabob”, and not at all worthy of living at the estate. His resentment is eventually shared by Sir Kit, who in anger of her not giving up her fortune, forces the kitchen to serve pork at every meal against her religious beliefs and eventually confines her in a single room for seven years until he eventually dies in an accident, and she leaves Ireland.

After the premature death of Sir Kit, a new Lord is installed, who will eventually put the family and estate into financial ruin. Sir Conolly Rackrent, known as Sir Condy, who is generally well-liked, precedes to amass enormous amounts of debt on the estate and his person through ventures in politics. These ventures succeed with placing him in parliament but ruins him in the process through the bribes given and loans taken which put him there. The story ends with him in poverty, living in a small lodge, drinking himself to death with Thady at his side while Thady’s son, Jason, has taken over full ownership of the estate through paying off Sir Condy’s massive debts. This final move is the ending of the Rackrent family with Sir Condy losing all land and dying in poverty.

In *Castle Rackrent* a start of the eventual downfall in the standing of the landowning class can be inferred throughout the story, through the subsequent collapse of the system which allows the estate to be used exclusively as a source of income. The misrule by the Rackrent family is concluded by losing the castle and lands which they previously held and extracted extraneous fees from. Although the narrator never outright questions the “right to rule” of the family,

mostly due to Thady's account and his affection for the Rackrents, the subtext, by using satire and caricature, shows the incompetence and lack of wisdom on their part and work to create a lack of legitimacy to the powers and title that comes with the Big House (Kreilkamp 32). Mismanagement from the ruling family brings the property to a dilapidated state, and it is only through Jason that it can continue to exist as a seat of economic and societal power. The social rise of Jason Quirk from the son of a long line of Irish, traditionally Catholic, servants to the saviour of the dilapidated estate projects the fall of the gentry and its unsustainable business practices.

Where the novel gains an extra perspective is in the footnotes of the text, where the fictional editor has revised Thady's account to make it more palatable and understandable toward an English audience. These footnotes provide information about the culture and customs of the relationship between gentry and peasantry in Ireland and blurs the line of storytelling between Thady as a focaliser and the editor as a narrator in the account (Connolly 670). This fictional editor is installed on the account of Thady, who is recollecting the story, being illiterate. It provides an extra insight into the narrative and thoughts of this editor, who at several points refer to the reader of the novel as being "English" and thus "ignorant" of the intricacies of Irish culture and speech, also refraining from translating Thady's colloquialisms or interrupted speech to a more standard variant of English (Connolly 665), thus allowing the story of the Rackrents to be told in the voice of the Irish Catholic, using spellings and idioms that vary from the "standard" English of the time, such as "childer" (79) and "kith and kin" (62).

One remarkable thing about the novel when examining it from a historical perspective is the fact that the Rackrent family, unlike Thady, are never explicitly portrayed as Protestant or Catholic. The family was in fact called by a Catholic name, O´Shaughlin, before changing name to Rackrent. Through applying historical context to this religious, subtextual theme of the novel we can infer that the name change came as a direct result of Penal laws in the 16th century, where they had to have changed both name and religion to keep the estate, as well as the fact that Sir Condy never could have entered parliament as a Catholic (Genet 62-63). Apart from being officially declared Protestants, the Rackrents do not seem too bothered with religion at all, apart from Sir Kit being discriminatory towards his estranged wife of Jewish faith. His successor Sir Condy is not even able to distinguish Thady's Catholic prayer book:

> …with that he swore such a terrible oath, as made me cross myself – 'and by this book, (said he, snatching up my ballad book, mistaking it for my prayer-book, which lay in the window) – and by this book, (said he) and by all the books that ever were shut and open… (Edgeworth 45)

Sir Condy, being ignorant of differences between a ballad book and a prayer book, has displayed to not have an invested interest in religion, and especially not Catholicism. Although he claims himself Protestant, due to him having been in parliament, he has no qualms about swearing oaths on Catholic symbols of worship, showing little regard for faith in general.

In conclusion of this section, *Castle Rackrent* tells the tale of the fall from grace of one social class, and the rise of another (Kreilkamp 32). The historical context of this story would predict the eventual demoting of Ascendancy landowners in Ireland, written during a time of political unrest where the legitimacy of these ownership structures came into question. Although on surface level not written as a critique of landowning families, subtext shows that the novel questions established norms in Irish society, such as the gentry's right to rule and the possibility of journeys through social classes regardless of religious background.

3.3 Topics and Themes in *The Real Charlotte*

The Real Charlotte tells the story of Anglo-Irish gentry and the emergence of an Irish Catholic middle-class in rural Ireland, set in the late 19th century after the Great Famine and during a time of great political change by the implementation of the Land Acts. The narrative centres around the Dysart family, of Protestant Ascendency, and their economic and social decline due to political factors of their time. The head of the family, Sir Benjamin, is bedridden after a stroke and leaves many of his civic and economic duties to his wife, the English Lady Isabel, and his agent Roddy Lambert. The titular character Charlotte Mullen is a single woman in her forties of somewhat undiscernible social standing, who in her youth had a romantic affair with the now married Mr Lambert and still pines after him but will eventually betray him in the pursuit of her true heart's desire, the Big House Gurthnamuckla. She takes in her twenty-one years younger cousin Francie Fitzpatrick when her family in Dublin no longer can provide for her. The eligible Francie immediately gains the interest of several men in the countryside, like Christopher, the eldest son in the Dysart family, due to

her carefree nature and good looks, but she tragically dies in an accident at the end of the story.

Like *Castle Rackrent*, both ruler and heir to the family estate Bruff, Sir Benjamin and Cristopher respectively, are portrayed as ineffective and directly damaging towards the standing of their place and the Ascendancy as a result. Sir Benjamin is senile and does not have the fortitude to deal with the business while Christopher generally is seen as weak and self-doubting, and thus unable to effectively keep the social standing of Bruff (Walshe 65-66). He is not prone to politics, nor does he understand the Land Acts that were being implemented across the country in the late 1800's despite being the inheritor of a large country estate: "Christopher laughed in a helpless way. 'I wish you were at the office still, Miss Mullen; if any one could understand the Land Act I believe it would be you.'" (Somerville and Ross 18).

While not having any malicious motives, Christopher is a futile case as a leader of the estate, preferring to spend his time alone doing photography rather than to join in the social expectations of his class (Cowart 21-22). Because he is unversed in the political backdrop of the time, most of the actual business of the estate is done by Mr Lambert, who himself fails to see the gravity of the situation:

> It was not only that several of Sir Benjamin's tenants had attended a Land League meeting the Sunday before, and that their religious director had written to inform him that they had there pledged themselves to the Plan of Campaign. That was annoying, but as the May rents were in he had no objection to their amusing themselves as they pleased during the summer… (Somerville and Ross 72)

Mr Lambert is very dismissive of the political change happening in Ireland at the time, something that will come back to bite him, because The Land League were largely successful in their goal of putting pressure on lawmakers to loosen the laws that were disenfranchising tenants. The effects of this movement can in the novel be felt by, among others, the character of Julia Duffy, the daughter of a Protestant farmer and Catholic dairymaid, who is the woman living on Gurthnamuckla, the rundown old estate, and refusing each agent from the Bruff estate trying to extort her for money:

> She had owned the farm for twenty years now, and had been the abhorrence of each successive Bruff agent. The land went from bad to worse; ignorance,

> neglect and poverty, are a formidable conjunction even without the moral support that the Land League for a few years had afforded her, and Miss Duffy tranquilly defied Mr. Lambert, offering him at intervals such rent as she thought fitting… (Somerville and Ross 42)

This shows that the activism of The Land League depicted in the novel had, just as in real-life, a direct impact on the ability of the tenants to push back against their landlords. While Julia owns the farm, inherited from her father, the Bruff estate collects rent for the land she sublets for a small period each year, something she feels comfortable to push back on and negotiate, even with the deteriorating value of the land she keeps.

Political change and social status of the time are, while not a major plot point in the novel, always present as subtext. Charlotte herself is not from the Ascendency, but still socialises with the Dysarts, doing so because of land ownership rather than manners or upbringing. Still, she is not presented on equal footing with, for example, the English high-society Lady Isabel. While still Protestant, Charlotte also intermingles between the social classes, creating a depiction of the Irish middle-class on the rise through the loosening laws of land acquirement in the era. Charlotte as a character tries to move between class divisions, conversing with Lady and peasant alike, but never really belonging to either world, signifying the emergence of the rising middle-class. Due to the escalation of her social standing, however, she often sees herself as better than her peers and extended family (Cowart 19-21).

Although Charlotte does her best to blend in with high society, there is clearly a well-defined ceiling on her social rise. While she in the end manages to procure more land in the form of Julia Duffy's homestead, the eventual loss of her niece as well as the loss of the love of Mr Lambert leaves her with nothing apart from property. Mr Lambert ends up destitute after mismanaging and embezzling money from the Dysart estate, and the novel ends with Charlotte on her new property, being reached by the news of Francie's death. The thing that motivates many of the characters, especially Charlotte, Mr Lambert, and Julia Duffy, is land, and the inherent power which it represents (Cowart 22). This is constructed in the novel as the real threat to the Anglo-Irish Ascendency, the acquiring of power by the lower classes through property, enabled by the political turmoil at the time (Norris 115). Due to the ineffectiveness and complacency of the gentry, represented by the Dysarts, Charlotte manages a social climb previously restricted to her class and personifies the drastic change of rule taking place in Ireland at the end of the 19th century.

4. Discussion of Cultural Reflections and Identities in the Novels

After the separate analyses of *Castle Rackrent* and *The Real Charlotte* above, a few common topics emerged, which will be discussed in this section. These topics are the self-destructing nature of the gentry, the emergence of social climbers, heteroglossia, subtextual challenge to the social order, and relevant political changes during the time. Below, their connection with Irish and Anglo-Irish identity will be discussed, and how each topic reflects the historical societal divide.

In *Castle Rackrent*, the titular family is portrayed as incompetent, unfit, and impotent. All the Lords of the house after Sir Patrick, who is depicted as the only ruler "worthy" of the title, dies without any children or direct heirs, instead passing the lands to an even more unfit cousin or brother. Through Sir Murtaugh, Sir Kit, and Sir Condy, the text paints the picture of three different iniquities regarding successful estate management. Sir Murtaugh's great flaw is that he is a miser, squeezing every penny from his tenants and generally making their lives miserable. Sir Kit represents absence, being away from the property he owns and knows nothing about, and when he finally settles there, he finds it miserable, a lot due to his unhappy marriage. Sir Condy's vice is the way he conducts himself, which is incredibly carefree. Being an extremely passive owner, he amasses massive amounts of debt and prefers to spend his days drinking whiskey punch rather than looking after his affairs.

The Real Charlotte also weaves a narrative where the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy seems unqualified to lead. Sir Benjamin is physically unable to run the estate, leaving the dealings of the land to Christopher and Mr Lambert. These three characters all embody the same incompetence present in *Castle Rackrent*. Mr Lambert is virtually functioning as the taxman of the estate, driving in exorbitant amounts of rent from the tenants, while embezzling the Dysarts for his own monetary gain. Sir Benjamin represents the absent owner, being too ill to be able to concern himself with the day-to-day business. Meanwhile, Christopher has the same vices as Sir Condy, being generally uninterested in his duties, and preferring to spend his time doing anything else. All of these "sins" (miserliness, absence, detachment) are shown to contribute to the dilapidating state of the families and their eventual downfall. While characters in the novels may think favourably of members of the ruling families, their actions

tell another story. Through the vices of these characters a pattern of incompetence is shown, painting the picture of an inability of the landowners to lead and attend to their estate.

Present in these novels is also the topic of social climbers, embodied by Jason Quirk and Charlotte, respectively. These are both non-members of the aristocracy who in the end possess a heightened social status through the acquirement of land previously belonging to the gentry. By this rise in standing, they can enjoy a greater amount of power in society, but both stories have caveats that come with their gain. Jason Quirk does not gain the respect of the townsfolk and tenants, who prefer the ineffective rule of Sir Condy, who was lax with rent and generous with his bribes and gifts. The novel ends with Jason being heavily protested for his perceived takeover of the estate, which leads him to concede a small lodge on the grounds to Sir Condy, in which the former landlord to public perception "retires", but later drinks himself to death, destitute but no longer in debt. *The Real Charlotte* ends with Charlotte's acquirement of Gurthnamuckla, but at the forfeiture of her happiness by losing the long-desired love of Mr Lambert through her schemes to take over the Big House. Although the estate is ramshackle and shabby, Charlotte still has aspiration to climb the social ladder, and this is her way of doing so. Although the Big House of her desire is rundown and not well looked after in any sense, it still represents a feature of power to Charlotte. The purchase of the Big House in both novels by Jason and Charlotte, respectively, both represent the reclaiming of the land from the gentry and forecasts a future where an equilibrium of the social order, and where the relationship between the landowners and tenants are more egalitarian, if not eradicated (Norris 115). In this sense, the tales reflect the rise of the non-dominant identity and a reduction in the vast rift between landowner and tenant, and the identities to which the two sides generally would adhere to. This narrative is thoroughly related to history and the changes in legislation at the time.

There are instances of heteroglossia as it is defined by Bakhtin in both texts, but the manner varies slightly. In *Castle Rackrent* we are told that the fictional editor of Thady's oral account edits his voice but refrains from doing it too much to retain his character, but instead provides translation in the footnotes dictated towards the "ignorant English reader" (Edgeworth 4). Charlotte is a similar case, but where Thady retains his natural voice through the narrator, she uses her standing between social classes to change her voice and pattern of speech depending on whom she addresses, but not always with great success:

> "Well your ladyship," she said, in the bluff, hearty voice which she felt accorded best with the theory of herself that she had built up in Lady Dysart's mind, "I'll head a forlorn hope to the bottom of the lake for you, and welcome; but for the honour of the house, you might give me a cup o´tay first!"
> Charlotte had many tones of voice, according with the many facets of her character, and when she wished to be playful she affected a vigorous brogue, not perhaps being aware that her own accent scarcely admitted of being strengthened." (Somerville and Ross 13)

Charlotte here fakes a social voice, one that she hopes will win some favour from the English high-society woman Lady Dysart, although her natural dialect still seeps through despite her best efforts. These examples, Thady's retained voice and Charlotte's attempt of faking one, both fall into Bakhtin's definition of heteroglossia, where the characters get to keep their speech intact and not surrender it to "bon ton", even though they are not speaking what could be considered "proper" literary language (Bakhtin 382-383). This grants both Thady and Charlotte an air of uniqueness, and more importantly authenticity, about them in that the former realises in the mind of the reader as a charming local, and the latter as a scheming liar. *The Real Charlotte* uses stylistic language shifts for Charlotte, the text on the page becoming full of localisms and colloquialisms when talking to Irish-Catholic characters and becoming more formal and proper when addressing the gentry. In both cases the use of their voice, real or fake, informs character and communicates how they are to be perceived. Heteroglossia present in *The Real Charlotte*, just as in *Castle Rackrent*, also marks identity. Lady Dysart, Englishwoman as she is, speaks throughout in grammatically "correct" English, while Irish characters keep their accents in the text with spellings like "grandfawther" (Somerville and Ross 45) or "white as the dhrivelling snow this minnit" (Somerville and Ross 212). The way the characters use language is essential to their personality and identity. The manner of speech is here drawing an unmistakable line in the sand between different class affiliations and clashing identities present in the novels.

Political and historical changes throughout Ireland can be seen in the subtext of the novels and create a setting where the status of the property-owner is continuously challenged through economic, social, or circumstantial means. Sir Kit uses middlemen and evictions to drive in money from the estate in *Castle Rackrent,* which were methods used by landlords at the time, allowed by the Penal Laws put in place against Catholic tenants. Actions such as these eventually led to growing resentment among the populace and later to political reformations

through Land Acts. The way that these societal transformations show themself in *The Real Charlotte* is through the ignorance of Christopher and his misplaced confidence in Mr Lambert, who both ignore these changes, and as a result this heads them towards an implied future collapse of the Dysart estate. *The Real Charlotte* is also set after the Great Famine, showing itself clearly in the living conditions of the lower-class and Catholic population where poverty and sickness is common.

Neither of the works examined in this study challenges the existing power structure on the surface. Thady, in the role of the focaliser, never questions the right of the Rackrent family to own and manage the estate, even after witnessing years upon years of mismanagement. He is, in fact, quite angry and disappointed in his son for reliving Sir Condy of his debt and thus stripping him of his ancestral land:

> "Look at him (says I, pointing to Sir Condy, who was just leaning back in his arm chair, with his arms falling beside him like one stupefied) is it you; Jason, that can stand in his presence and recollect all he has been to us, and all we have been to him, and yet use him so at the last?" (…) "Oh Jason! Jason! How will you stand to this in the face of the county, and all who know you, (says I); and what will people tink and say, when they see you living here in Castle Rackrent, and the lawful owner turned out the seat of his ancestors, without a cabin to put his head into, or so much as a potatoe to eat?" (Edgeworth 76-77)

Here Thady, after experiencing all the mismanagement of several generations, still stands up for the Rackrents, believing their right to rule supreme over economic standing or negligence and failure to keep the property operational. In *The Real Charlotte*, the Dysarts remain in control of their social standing, but it is implied that after the conclusion the family will suffer a great fall from grace. Sir Benjamin is dead at the end of the story, their agent Mr Lambert is destitute, in severe debt, and revealed as an embezzler, Christopher has been portrayed as an unproductive leader, Lady Dysart is too distracted and unversed in the affairs of the land to care, and their daughter Pamela is "destined for spinsterhood" (Cowart 21). When examining the members of each of the households of *Castle Rackrent* and *The Real Charlotte*, it is inferred that the coming fall in the social graces of the Anglo-Irish Ascendency family is brought on by the vices discussed above: miserliness, absence, and detachment.

5. Conclusion

Castle Rackrent and *The Real Charlotte* illustrate the political changes in Ireland throughout the 18th and 19th century by the portrayals of high society, aristocratic families, and their eventual downfall, brought on in large part by real-world politics and tensions existing in the subtext. The first tells a tale of a loyal servant in the employ of a family line underserving of his regard, even more so as their standing and estate starts to lessen as the novel goes on, culminating in the loss of all land to someone who was born exceptionally lower in the social ranks, Thady's son. *The Real Charlotte*, on the other hand, principally shows this rise and transformation of and between the classes and how it can be acquired through obtaining land, a very apt reflection of the historical context in which the novel is set. Here the gentry is yet to be deposed by the end, but one can infer from subtext that the Dysarts, serving as an exemplar of the Ango-Irish rule, do not have that long left in terms of the economic or social benefits they have enjoyed thus far. The novel in fact closes by the acquirement of the Big House by characters not of the gentry, representing an upheaval of the standing general order which had been circumstance in Ireland for hundreds of years up until the turning point in the late 19th century, when egalitarian efforts towards land reform started to take place.

In conclusion, the conflicting identities of gentry and peasantry have exceptionally important roles in these novels, ending with a reversion of the classes. Heteroglossia and the use of language and diverse voices denote these identities and further exemplify the divide present in Irish society at the time. Both texts discuss the same points of what makes a bad landowner and the traits of the people in and around the family which leads to their downfall. Where they differ are in their portrayals of "acceptable" identity. The Rackrents are shown to be legitimate owners of the estate in the eye of the law and public both, even though we can infer that they come from Catholic backgrounds and changed their religion to not lose their property under the Penal Laws. In *The Real Charlotte* on the other hand, class and identity has a floor and a ceiling, preventing any character to rise or fall too far away from their affiliation. Charlotte moves between these spaces by the help of her land ownership credentials, which makes her exemplify the rise of the middle-class in Ireland, but in the text someone with a discernible low-class affiliation can never be made high, and vice versa. Written a century apart, these novels portray history through fiction, depicting the fall of deep-rooted hierarchies and reflecting a society of opposing identities through context, subtext, and language.

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