

A Post-Colonial Reading of Maria Edgeworth's Anglo-Irish Novels: Castle Rackrent and the Absentee

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Abstract : The Big House literature embodies Irish history. It requires a special dimension of moral and social significance in relation to its owners. The Big House is a metaphor for the decline of the protestant Ascendancy that ruled in a catholic country and oppressed a native people. In the tradition of the Big House fiction, Maria Edgeworth's Castle Rackrent and the Absentee explore the effect of the Anglo-Irish protestant Ascendancy as it governed and misgoverned Ireland. Edgeworth illustrates the tradition of the Big House as a symbol of both a personal and historical theme. This paper provides a reading of Castle Rackrent and The Absentee from a post-colonial perspective. The paper maintains that Edgeworth's novel contain elements of a radical critique of the colonialist enterprise. In our postcolonial reading of Maria Edgeworth's novels, one that goes beyond considering works as those of Sir Walter Scott, regional evidence has been found of Edgeworth's colonial ideology. The significance of Castle Rackrent lies mainly in the fact that is the first English novel to speak in the voice of the colonized Irish. What is more important is that the irony and the comic aspect of the novel comes from its Irish narrator (Thady Quirk) and its Irish setting Ireland. Edgeworth reveals the geographical 'other' to her English reader, by placing her colonized Irish narrator and his son, Jason Quirk, in a position of inferiority to emphasize the gap between Englishness and Irishness. Furthermore, this satirical aspect is a political one. It works to create and protect the superiority of the domestic English reader over the Irish subject. In other words, the implication of the colonial system of the novel and of its structure of dominance and subordination is overlooked by its comic dimension. The matrimonial plot in the Absentee functions as an imperial plot, constructing Ireland as a complementary but ever unequal partner in the family of Great Britain. This imperial marriage works hegemonically to produce the domestic stability considered so crucial to national and colonial stability. Moreover, in order to achieve her proper imperial plot, Edgeworth reconciliation of England and Ireland is seen in the marriage of the Anglo-Irish (hero/Colambre) with the Irish (heroine/Grace Nugent), and the happy bourgeois family; consequently, it becomes the model for colonizer-colonized relationships. Edgeworth must establish modes of legitimate behavior for women and men. The Absentee explains more purposely how familial reorganization is dependent on the restitution of masculine authority and advantage, particularly for Irish community.

Keywords : Maria Edgeworth, post-colonial, reading, Irish

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