5.3.2. Marriage Stories.

> *When a man and a woman talk of love they speak two different languages. They can never understand each other because women love with their imagination and men with their senses. (*CSS, 170*-171)*

If the Gothic stories explore the possibilities of subverting traditional notions of femininity (often by supernatural means) and offer an alternative to the marriage plot, the group I have classified as "marriage stories" evidences the dangers in relationships between men and women in a less subtle way. Again the author exorcises personal anxieties and airs her personal views about the institution of marriage. Her long relationship with Henry Anderson, which never ended in marriage, together with Glasgow's suspicions of his romance with Queen Marie of Romania, find their reflection in male characters who include, as Meeker remarks (*CSS*, 17), golf and adultery among their recreations. To her, marriage benefits only men, who gain in comfort, while women give up everything for love only to be abandoned or betrayed:

> Although Ellen Glasgow's "social history" of the South appears to have been her main concern, the real focus in all her fiction seems to be the struggle of women for respect in a world dominated by men. Her short stories dramatize a complete cycle of relationships, from the first apprehensive encounter to the last bitter rejection. (*CSS*, 16)

Glasgow uses invalidism and neuralgia in the marriage stories to unmask the devastating effects of adhering to the ideal of True Womanhood, which either debilitate women physically and / or mentally, or effectively invalidate their identities. However, she also points at the evidence that making oneself sick constitutes a source of power

within the domestic that no woman could even dream of achieving if healthy. Both sides of invalidism, though, are seen as degrading and pitiable. The self-effacing wives, the betrayed lovers, and the frustrated spinsters who fill these stories explain, as Meeker contends in the introduction to his edition of the short stories (*CSS*, 17), why Glasgow never married and instead cherished a network of sisterly relationships that did not curtail her independence. According to this classification, six stories constitute the marriage group: "Between Two Shores" (1899), "Thinking Makes It So" (1917), "The Difference" (1923), "The Artless Age" (1923), "Romance and Sally Byrd" (1924) and "The Professional Instinct" (1962).

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"Between Two Shores" was first published in *McClure's Magazine* in 1899. It was the first story published by Glasgow, but as Richard K. Meeker points out (*CSS*, 39), she did not include it in her 1924 collection *The Shadowy Third and Other Stories*. Perhaps because she was not satisfied with the female protagonist's submissive attitude and its romantic ending. Meeker suggests that Glasgow drew her idea for the story (which she finished writing by November 1897) from her first trip to England in the summer of 1896 after she had been invited by her brother Arthur, then a wealthy engineer in London.

The story depicts a condensed female *bildungsroman* in which the protagonist, a Southern thirty-year-old woman called Lucy Smith, sets out for a voyage from New

York to Liverpool. Lucy has recently become a widow, and for the first time she is experiencing independence with a mixture of excitement and fear:

> There was delight in the idea of freedom - of being accountable to no one, of being absolutely independent of advice. Now she wished that she had an acquaintance who would wish her goodspeed, or shout an indistinct pleasantry from the crowded landing. (*CSS*, 25)

Apparently, Lucy's life has been insipid and empty of enjoyment or even feeling: the small lines in her face, the author says, (*CSS*, 24) are not the consequence of experience but the result of a life of dullness and ignorance. Possibly a lively girl eager for romance and thrilling emotions, her boring life in a Southern plantation and her marriage to a much older man (we assume, since he is dead) have combined in her the innocence of a frightened little girl with the looks of a wasted beauty. Leaning against the railing, Lucy observes the passengers waving goodbye to their families and friends on the landing as the steamer starts to move, while she feels a strange homesickness for her now distant Southern home and the husband she lost but never loved:

> One might have classified her in superficial survey as a woman in whom temperamental fires had been smothered, rather than extinguished, by the ashes of unfulfilment . . . her thoughts recoiled to the dull Southern home, to the sisters-in-law who made her life burdensome, and to the little graveyard where the husband she had never loved lay buried. (*CSS*, 24-25)

Lucy feels seasick from the moment the voyage starts, but she manages to walk out of her state-room and climb to the deck with the help of an unknown gentleman who happens to be called L. Smith as well. Lawrence Smith, though a strange man with harsh manners, sits by her chair and remains attentive to her sickness, constantly bringing her little trays of food and wrapping rugs about her. While discussing the

coincidence in their names, Lucy protests that her name has connotations of impersonality, childishness and lack of character. As happens with Glasgow's Gothic stories, Lucy is identified with her husband's name instead of her own. Everyone on board knows her as Mrs. L. Smith, and her luggage, state-room and deck chair are labelled with the same name. Her husband's name was Lucien, and the similarity in the two names suggests the loss of identity that Glasgow repeatedly denounces in marriage:

> 'I have always known that life would have been different for me if I hadn't been called Lucy. People would not treat me like a child if I were Augusta or even Agnes — but *Lucy*!'
> 'People change their names sometimes,' he suggested.
> She laughed softly. 'I tried to. I tried to become Lucinda, but I couldn't. Lucy stuck to me.' (*CSS*, 27)

While Lawrence suggests the possibility of changing her name for reasons other than those she imagines, Lucy complains about the limitations a name entails for women. Adopting the husband's family name (and, in this case, a feminine version of the husband's Christian name as well) and being defined by it again anticipates the question that French feminists like Luce Irigaray among others have posed, that is, the impossibility for women to express themselves within a patriarchal language system. Although she tried to change her name (and, we infer, her identity) into Lucinda, the name Lucy and the adjoining values of dependence and selflessness through which others have identified her, has clung to her in spite of her wishes for self-definition.

Her newly acquired freedom and, presumably, her girlhood desires for romance crystallise in the ambiguous character of Lawrence Smith, a sort of updated Byronic hero who seems to hide a terrible secret but whose charm and attentions irresistibly

attract her: “If one were in his power, how quietly he might bend and break mere flesh and bone.” (*CSS*, 29) The way Lucy voices her romantic fantasy with Lawrence reveals she has been socialised into conventional ideas of female absolute powerlessness once in male hands (physical, economic, political, or legal hands, that is). Her socialisation into Victorian social mores is further noticed in a conversation between Lucy and Lawrence, in which she claims her wickedness for not assuming self-sacrifice gently and being content with it as a True Woman should, and instead cherishing romantic visions of independence:

> ‘Somehow I think a woman is never happy,’ she responded gently . . .
> ‘What is goodness for, if it does not make one happy? I am a rough brute, and I get my deserts, but the world should be gentle to a thing like you.’
> ‘No, no,’ she protested, ‘I am not good.’
> His eyes lightened. ‘Any misdemeanors punishable by law?’
> ‘I am discontented,’ she went on. ‘I rage when things go wrong. I am not a saint.’ . . .
> ‘I should like to be a porpoise . . . and to skim that blue water in the sunshine. How happy they are!’ (*CSS*, 29-31)

Lawrence obviously falls in love with Lucy, especially with her innocent charm, her blind faith in him and, I would add, an extreme delicacy and powerlessness, which does not allow her to eat or move about the deck without help. Lucy’s perfect embodiment of feminine sickly loveliness, which the cult of invalidism so idealises, is made strikingly patent in her confession of love to Lawrence: “I should choose to be broken by you to being caressed by any other man ---” (*CSS*, 34). Finally, on the last evening, his remorse makes him decide to tell her the whole truth about him. His real name is not even Lawrence Smith, and he boarded the ship escaping American justice and a prison sentence for murder. He assumed the false identity of L. Smith from a

passenger with that name (he inferred it was Lucy's husband) who had delayed and missed the boat. By nursing Lucy's seasickness and offering her his arm to walk about the deck, he let every passenger think that he was her husband, thus avoiding suspicions. Lucy spends her last night on the ship weeping about Lawrence, thinking she has lost her chance to find love when she had only started to experience it; "It was so short" (*CSS*, 37), she muses.

The next morning, as the ship is arriving in Liverpool and Lawrence and Lucy are saying goodbye to each other forever, a man with a telegram appears, glancing from right to left and apparently looking for someone. In a desperate effort to save Lawrence, Lucy takes his arm and tells the ship's surgeon that they are not in their honeymoon (as everyone thought) but have been married for eight years. Lucy's brave act of generosity thus unites the couple forever, but Glasgow does not seem to be content with such a romantic ending. While Lucy sweetly admits she is grateful to the detective for having appeared to make her aware of her love for Lawrence, he remarks ironically: "It was Cook's man after a tourist, . . . but God bless him." (*CSS*, 38)

Although the story basically tells us that love can move mountains and even save (apparently) honest men from the gallows, it also carries the cultural assumption, Linda Wagner posits, that "the best use of *her* life is to save the life of her beloved, a man, and a criminal at that."[1] At any rate, as Pamela Matthews similarly argues, marriage is more beneficial to Lawrence than it is to Lucy.[2] Despite the traditional fairy-tale ending,

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[1] Linda W. Wagner, *Ellen Glasgow: Beyond Convention* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982) 67. [emphasis in original]
[2] Pamela Matthews, *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Traditions* (Charlottesville and London: the University Press of Virginia, 1994) 32.

Glasgow seems to suggest, Lucy Smith embodies Victorian conventions of womanhood that cripple her physically and emotionally, and lead her to sacrifice her newly found independence for a life (very probably, full of economic difficulties and social marginality) of submission to a man she does not know and who might not be worth the sacrifice.

*** * ***

In **"Thinking Makes It So"**, published in *Good Housekeeping* in February 1917, Glasgow follows the same trend of romantic attachment as an outlet to the heroine's unfulfilling life she had used in "Between Two Shores". Margaret French is a lonely and depressed spinster of forty-three, whose plain looks have condemned her to a life of invisibility and self-sacrifice:

> Though [Mrs. Mills] had known Margaret French all her life, she could think of her only as worn and repressed and overworked and middle-aged . . . There is nothing, she concluded presently, that takes the youth out of one so soon as the habit of self-effacement, and Margaret French had effaced herself consistently ever since Mrs. Mills could remember. (*CSS*, 73)

Margaret's modest income as a poetry writer has been exclusively devoted to the care of the sister and nieces who depend on her. Beauty in the South gives a woman the right to be loved and to expect attention and protection from others, while lack of it requires self-sacrifice and selflessness in a proportional degree:

> Of course when one is born plain and poetic in a family of commonplace beauties, there isn't anything for one to do except efface oneself speedily . . . [Her sisters] had, one and all, married brilliantly, only to be widowed

> disastrously; and the charming fruits of their conventional folly had fallen presently to the devoted care of their "plain" sister Margaret. (*CSS*, 73)

While Margaret is the economic support of her family, her plainness has resulted in a feeling of redundancy and inadequacy, as is the case in the portraits of so many other spinsters in the Glasgow literary gallery. However, the brilliant prospects of marriage and the future of happiness that was expected from her more accomplished sister Fanny,[3] Glasgow warns the reader, have also resulted in a terribly unfulfilling life. Margaret's sister and nieces are described as vampires who suck her youth and energy and who never feel grateful for everything she has done, as if Margaret's self-sacrifice was taken for granted on account of her appearance: "Those girls have sucked the blood out of you . . . You have given your life to them, and they don't half appreciate it." (*CSS,* 74)

Very clearly — or, at least, so Glasgow seems to indicate — Fanny French Buford is the least likable character in the story. She embodies the prototype, so thoroughly described in medical books and popular literature of the nineteenth century,[4] of the blood-sucking invalid whose illness is entirely a matter of will and who takes advantage of relatives for the sake of her own comfort. Needless to say, it is much easier

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[3] According to the Southern code, a woman's happiness was measured as directly proportional to her physical attractiveness. Glasgow illustrates this assumption in the character of Virginia Pendleton, the female protagonist of her novel *Virginia* (1913), the glorious brunette who seemed to be "cut out for happiness" (*V* 19) but whose shallowness and self-effacement make her life a tragedy.

[4] Previous sections have discussed physicians' ambiguous attitudes towards "female maladies". Freud, for instance, warned that the symptoms of certain disorders could be intentional, as Diane Price Herndl quotes in *Invalid Women*. However, a more illustrative account can be found in Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1871 novel *Pink and White Tyranny*, also quoted in Price Herndl's book: "a woman, armed with sick headaches, nervousness, debility, presentiments, fears, horrors, and all sorts of imaginary and real diseases, has an eternal armory of weapons of subjugation." See Diane Price Herndl, *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940* (Chapel Hill and London: the University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 150-151.

for a woman trained in idleness and fed with romantic novels to feign illness than to confront the economic difficulties of raising her daughters on her own:

> ‘Do you know, Aunt Margaret, he [the doctor] told me this morning that mother would be perfectly well if we could only get her off that sofa. He says the sofa is killing her — that she ought to be made to get up and stir about — do housework or something —’
> ‘I know,’ said Margaret wearily, ‘I know.’ She had heard it all so often before — the gruff old doctor's name for Mrs. Buford's malady, which he bluntly diagnosed as "ingrowing selfishness" — that she had ceased to argue about it. For ten years, ever since her tragic divorce, poor Fanny had been too unhappy to do anything except lie on a sofa and read novels — very light ones. Even to order meals gave her a headache. (*CSS*, 75)

Although Glasgow clearly pities Margaret and condemns Fanny’s idleness, she does not miss the chance to attack medical men again. The doctor’s diagnosis of Fanny’s malady, though very comic, evidences medical (and male) attitudes towards ill or invalid women that express social mores rather than scientific conclusions. Again, the recommended treatment for such maladies is not physical or intellectual stimulation but domestic work. Fanny’s present state of invalidism, Glasgow reminds us, is the consequence of a system that values women as beautiful objects and ceases to worship them once they lose their beauty. Fanny, like Virginia Pendleton and so many others, is another Southern Belle placed on a pedestal and abandoned there without viable options to succeed in life without male help. Invalidism is thus the easiest and most socially acceptable choice that Fanny can think of after the failure of her marriage, since her society has invalidated almost every other alternative for her:

> She was a long pale woman, who had once been queenly and imposing. Her features were still small and pretty, but her skin, once rose-leaf in texture, had withered and grown yellow, and her expression was one of resentful and embittered helplessness. The world had used her badly, and she had thought so long and so deeply about her grievances that every line in her face revealed the tragedy of her life. (*CSS*, 77)

On arriving home, Margaret finds she has received a letter from a mysterious man called John Brown, who works building a railroad in Colorado and who seems to admire her poems. When she opens the envelope, she is startled to find that the letter begins "My Poet, I have read your poems, and I love you because of them." (*CSS*, 76) To Margaret's astonishment, the letter continues as follows:

> I dreamed of you just as I know you are in reality — brave and strong, pure and beautiful, and I dreamed that you were wearing rose-color, the flaming rose of the sunrise. It will break my heart, Margaret, for I, too, am a poet . . . if you are not what you were in my dream — rare and pale and all in rose-colored silk. (*CSS*, 76-77)

John Brown's passionate declaration of love is obviously addressed not to the real Margaret but to his fantasy of her. Margaret realises that her plain looks and coarse dress are very far from the image John Brown has pictured in his imagination, but the thrill of experiencing romance for the first time is stronger than her than common sense, and she resolves to answer the letter as if she really was the Margaret French he describes. Carried away by "the saving grace of a righteous egotism" (*CSS*, 78), she dares to rebel against Fanny when she asks her to borrow new novels from the local library: "'I didn't have time to look, Fanny. Suppose you go to the library tomorrow. Doctor Glover says you would be better if you exerted yourself.' It was the first revolt of her enslaved and suppressed egoism, the first result of that strange love-letter." (*CSS*, 79)

The letter operates important changes in Margaret's personality. She continues feeling unattractive and inadequate — "I am just what I always was, . . . That's the only advantage of being plain, nobody ever tells you you have broken.' (*CSS*, 78) — this

time because a man has praised qualities she does not believe she has. However, the thought of a man who believes her beautiful takes her to speculate about how it would feel to be so. The morning after she receives the letter, she brushes and curls her hair, and puts some of her niece's powder in her hair. Seeing that everyone notices the changes in her appearance, she concludes that thinking of herself as beautiful cannot do any harm, since everything is just in John Brown's mind. As weeks pass and more letters arrive, the Margaret French who is beautiful and courageous gradually comes into existence in the real Margaret's appearance just as she does in his thoughts. As the two following quotations show, Margaret evolves from self-sacrifice to self-assertion through the magic of her poems and her lover's imagination: this miracle just takes one night to happen:

> 'Oh, if I could only be what he thinks me!' . . .
> 'There is a Margaret French somewhere who is courageous and strong, pure and beautiful, because he thinks her so. Even if she is only in his mind, still she is real. She exists just as much as I exist to Fanny, or Fanny exists to me. He creates her while he thinks of her.' (*CSS,* 78, 81)

The last step in Margaret's transformation consists, of course, in buying a flaming rose-coloured gown like the one John Brown had always imagined her wearing. To the surprise of her family and neighbours, the colour matches her hair and her smile, and makes her look "real young . . . the kind of soft and happy look a girl has when she is trying on the dress for her first party." (*CSS*, 84) To Margaret, wearing that gown makes her aware of her foolish attempt to recover youth and romance, but also helps her to become closer to the imaginary woman she has come to think as real: "You can't really make yourself over by taking thought . . . yet it does seem less of a lie when I am

really wearing rose colour. I'm just as plain, I know, as I ever was, but I feel different somehow, just because I've got in the habit of thinking myself attractive." (*CSS*, 84)

Just as she is trying on her dress, a telegram arrives from John Brown: *"Arrive at eight this evening."* (*CSS*, 86) Although Margaret had never consented to a meeting, and although she tries to think of ways to avoid seeing him, she finally resolves to change into one of her old grey dresses and admit that she has deceived him. While she is unfastening her dress, one of her nieces rushes in and tells her there is a man waiting downstairs, so she walks down resenting that her dream must come to an end at last. The ending is, of course, predictable:

> She had paused under the chandelier, and the flickering light from the crystal pendants flashed over her pale face and over the bright rose of her gown. 'He sees the truth, and he will never forgive me,' she heard a voice saying somewhere. 'How could he ever forgive me? . . . If I could only die,' she thought bitterly. 'If I could only die before he speaks to me.'
> Then, while the wish was still in her mind, she saw his smile break like light over his face, and his arms were held out to her.
> 'My beautiful, I should have known you among a hundred women,' he said softly, 'for you are just as I dreamed of you!' (*CSS*, 88-89)

The happy ending to this half-Cinderella and half-Pygmalion story takes the reader back to its title. As Richard K. Meeker points out in his editorial note to the story, (*CSS*, 89) Glasgow recovers Hamlet's speech to Rosencrantz and Guildernstern ("There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so") and acknowledges the power of imagination to operate a miracle on two middle-aged people. Linda Wagner contends that Glasgow reflected on her own personal life in 1917, when she was also a middle-aged woman just becoming engaged to Henry Anderson.[5] Despite the positive

[5] Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 67.

consequences this romance brings to Margaret's self-esteem, and despite the (temporary) fulfilment Anderson gave to Glasgow's life, she cannot avoid criticising — if only subtly — prevailing views of the period which pictured women only as reflections of male desires: "He had been ill, and he was lonely; he was bored and he needed her — he needed her as no man had ever needed her in her life . . . He needed, she saw, not the woman, but the thought of her — *the ideal that he had created*." (*CSS*, 81; emphasis added)

The Margaret John Brown has been picturing in his mind throughout the story exists not as woman but as concept, that of the womanly woman, which crippled so many women into imperfect versions of an unattainable male fantasy. Regarding her appearance as dull in comparison to that of the double he has created, Margaret never struggles to reveal her real self, but to become the ideal he desires.

* * *

Except for the two previous stories, most of Glasgow's short fiction (as most of her novels) explores the conflicting relationships between men and women, and the disastrous consequences that conventional marriage brings to women's lives. **"The Difference"**, published in *Harper's Magazine* in June 1923 (*CSS*, 183), is again set in New York, where a middle-aged wife is watching autumn leaves fall while she faces the reality of her lost youth:

> For twenty years, every autumn since her marriage, Margaret Fleming had watched the leaves from this window; and always it had seemed to her that they were a part of her life which she held precious. As they fell she had known that they carried away something she could never recover — youth,

> beauty, pleasure, or only memories that she wanted to keep. Something gracious, desirable and fleeting; but never until this afternoon had she felt that the wind was sweeping away the illusion of happiness by which she lived. (*CSS*, 165)

In this story, Glasgow again presents the plight of a traditional wife who has been trained to remain within the domestic and be content with it, while her husband has enjoyed the privileges of education, a position in public life, and economic independence. Margaret Fleming has got used to living an illusion of domestic bliss and letting life pass in front of her window without taking part in it; now she has to confront the harsh reality of her husband's infidelity. After she receives a letter from his mistress, she realises about the uselessness of her life and the abyss that separates them despite twenty years of apparently perfect marriage. The double moral standard is again at work; at forty-four, Margaret feels unable to make a new start, while her husband George is still considered to be in the prime of his life:

> 'I am younger than he is by a year,' she thought, and yet he can begin over again to love, while a new love for me would be desecration.' . . . The thought flashed into her mind that she knew him in reality no better than if she had lived with a stranger for twenty years. Yet, until a few hours ago, she would have said, had any one asked her, that their marriage was as perfect as any mating between a man and a woman could be in this imperfect world. (*CSS,* 166)

George Fleming is a brilliant sketch of the traditional male character Glasgow was to picture in her most celebrated novels: not overtly wicked and cunning but morally ambiguous and totally self-centred, George is the younger brother of Oliver Treadwell in *Virginia* (1913), and the role model for the characters of Jason Greylock in *Barren Ground* (1925) and George Birdsong in *The Sheltered Life* (1932). George, we assume, has kept the pretence of a happy marriage to a proper Victorian woman for the

sake of his own comfort, while he has sought for pleasure and passion elsewhere. Margaret's acid remark about her pale cheeks, which contrast with the red lilies she has placed on the table, evidences her awareness of George's double life:

> 'You always liked red.' Her mouth lost its softness. 'And I was pale even as a girl.' His genial gaze swept her face. 'Oh, well, there's red and red, you know. Some cheeks look best pale.' . . . He needed her for his work, she realized, if not for his pleasure. She stood, as she had always done, for the serious things of life. This book could not have been written without her. Even his success in his profession had been the result of her efforts as well as his own. (*CSS*, 167)

Margaret's allusion to red cheeks constitutes a direct reference to his mistress' name, Rose Morrison; the symbolic value of the colour is obvious. George's position in society and a system of values that excludes women from the public sphere allows him to have a submissive wife-servant at home while he comfortably keeps a mistress within a few miles. His control over wife and mistress is assured by making them both economically dependent on him. Margaret finds herself in the most helpless position, as her dependence, her upbringing and her age do not provide her with viable alternatives to rebel against her situation: "The terror, which had clutched her like a living thing, had its fangs in her heart. Terror of loss, of futility. Terror of the past because it tortured her. Terror of the future because it might be empty even of torture." (*CSS*, 168)

While she recalls her last conversation with George (his only words to her have to do with buttons to be sewed, flowers to be sent, and golf clothes to be arranged for the next morning) and imagines what his conversations with Rose must be like, she receives the visit of her friend Dorothy Chambers. Dorothy, a vivacious and intelligent middle-aged woman with an active life (as we infer from the text, possibly a suffragette as well), comments on the fact that a mutual friend has let her husband come back home

after he had asked her for a divorce. Margaret, presumably socialised into believing in romantic novels and the sacredness of married love, retorts that she would give George a divorce if he loved another woman. Dorothy gently laughs at her innocence and points out at the real reasons why women are reluctant to give up their husbands:

> 'When a man and a woman talk of love they speak two different languages. They can never understand each other because women love with their imagination and men with their senses.' . . .
> 'If he really loves the other woman, Janet ought to give him up,' she said.
> At this Dorothy turned on her. 'Would you, if it were George?' she demanded . . .
> 'I should do it if it were George,' she said again, very slowly.
> 'Well I think you would be very foolish . . . For when George ceases to be desirable for sentimental reasons, he will still have his value as a good provider.' (*CSS*, 170-171)

After Dorothy leaves, Margaret resolves to confront Rose Morrison at once. The address in Rose's letter corresponds to a house George owns in an "unfashionable suburb" (*CSS*, 171) of New York, a physical and metaphorical space which has been invisible to her all these years and which has comfortably allowed George his infidelity. Rose Morrison embodies one of Glasgow's versions of what I would term the pseudo-New Woman, which again provides a sketch for more intense characters like Jenny Blair Archbald in The *Sheltered Life*. An artist in her early twenties, she exudes independence and self-reliance, to the point (in Margaret's and Glasgow's eyes) of becoming ordinary. She plainly states to Margaret that George really loves her but continues to live with Margaret to avoid hurting her feelings. Rose's romanticised view of George makes her believe that his wife does not satisfy his intellectual and emotional needs, and that "it would take an artist to understand him" (*CSS*, 175), to which Margaret jokingly replies: "But do you really imagine . . . that George is complex?" (*CSS*, 175) Rose remarks that

she would give way and not interfere with "his right to happiness, to self-development" (*CSS*, 176) if she was in Margaret's place, and insists on her having told Margaret the truth for George's sake, as "he would rather suffer in silence all his life than make you unhappy." (*CSS*, 176) Glasgow ironically contrasts the two women's radically different visions of the same man, as the following excerpts illustrate:

> 'I knew if you cared for George, you would feel as I do about sparing him.'
> About sparing him! As if she had done anything for the last twenty years, Margaret reflected, except think out new and different ways of sparing George! (*CSS*, 174)

> 'But to-day he needs new inspiration, new opportunities. He needs the companionship of a modern mind.'
> 'Yes he has kept young at my cost,' thought the older woman. 'I have helped by a thousand little sacrifices, by a thousand little cares and worries, to preserve this unnatural youth which is destroying me. I have taken over the burden of details in order that he might be free for the larger interests of life. If he is young to-day, it is at the cost of my youth.' (*CSS*, 177)

In spite of her own feelings of unhappiness and helplessness, she surrenders to Rose's youthful self-reliance and blunt sincerity, while she reflects that George must love this woman deeply if he has destroyed their marriage for her sake: "I think if he had done this thing with any other motive than a great love, I should hate him until I died." (*CSS*, 177) Before she leaves, Margaret promises the young woman she will not stand in their way. In spite of her Victorian upbringing and her futile self-effacement, Glasgow's sympathies lie with Margaret: she is pictured in the story as a victimised wife, crippled by ignorance and enforced domesticity, unable to act or think independently.

Margaret's inability to react and her wifely duty of self-sacrifice prevent her even from being angry with George; instead, she feels pity for all the silent suffering he must have endured. With a discourse that strikes a twenty-first century reader, Glasgow

shows Victorian women's inability to cope with real life and the pernicious consequences of a social system that trains them to remain domestic and submissive, delicate and sacrificing to the point of complete disregard for their own selves:

> 'How he must love her to have sacrificed me as he has done.' . . . she was able to attain some sympathy with her husband's suffering. What agony of mind he must have endured in these past months, these months when they had worked so quietly side by side on his book! What days of gnawing remorse! What nights of devastating anguish! . . . The longing to spare him, to save him from the suffering she had endured, pervaded her heart.
> (*CSS*, 178-179)

Margaret comes back home to face a life of emptiness and purposelessness, ready to relinquish her happiness for the sake of her husband's, as both women have agreed that *his* happiness should come first. Where Margaret expected tears and anxious replies from George, she finds only surprise. Evidently, George had expected to carry on with his affair with Rose without her ever knowing, and of course he never had any interest in divorcing her to marry Rose. As her wise friend Dorothy had told her, comfort and not love is what makes men continue to live with their wives. To Margaret's question about whether he means to leave her or not, George answers, "Where on earth could I go?" (*CSS*, 182) Glasgow's plain statement about men needs no further comment here:

> So it all was wasted! Nothing that she could do could lift the situation above the level of the commonplace, the merely vulgar. She was defrauded not only in happiness, but even of the opportunity to be generous. Her sacrifice was as futile as that girl's passion . . . 'You don't understand such things, Margaret. It hadn't any more to do with you than— than—' He hesitated, fished in the stagnant waters of his mind, and flung out abruptly, 'than golf has. It was a sort of — well, sort of — recreation.'. . . For an instant, such is the perversity of fate, it seemed to the wife that she and this strange girl were united by some secret bond which George could not share — by the bond of woman's immemorial disillusionment.
> (*CSS*, 182-183)

Glasgow's pervading statement that fighting over a man degrades women brings the reader again to Margaret's (and the author's) final conclusion, which links this story with the bulk of Glasgow's fiction. Women of different backgrounds and generations can create bonds of union (however strange they may seem in this story) that may prove more productive and mutually enriching than normative heterosexual relationships. In the case of "The Difference", Glasgow's ironic title and almost sarcastic ending shows there is no difference at all. Both Margaret and Rose have been united by their error in wanting to make George happy instead of making themselves happy. Predictably, they have both awakened to the frustration of trying to understand the needs of a man who is not really worth understanding.

* * *

"The Artless Age" appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* in August 1923 (*CSS*, 202). In this story, Glasgow makes an ironic sketch of the changing social mores of the South by portraying and confronting two different types of women, the Victorian Southern Belle and the New Woman. As Glasgow seems to suggest, the womanly woman does not have many chances to succeed (even in Richmond) after the First World War, although there is a whole generation of Southerners who still worships helpless beauties and Victorian codes of behaviour.

Mrs. Askew, a respectable widow engaged in various societies for social welfare and chairperson of the National Committee on Eugenics, is intent on marrying her only son Richard to "a nice girl" (*CSS*, 184). Not satisfied with local girls, as "none of the

daughters of her friends appeared to meet her requirements" (*CSS*, 185), she has contacted a distant relative from the Virginia mountains, whose lovely daughter has been educated in a French convent and seems to possess all the qualities Mrs. Askew desires:

> Mary Louise Littleton had spent all her life, with the exception of her cloistered years, in a village at the foot of the Blue Ridge, where she cultivated roses for an occupation and played croquet for exercise. 'Just as I did in my girlhood,' observed Mrs. Askew complacently. Though the girl was twenty, the Victorian aura still surrounded her, if her mother's letters were to be trusted. The possibility that Mary Louise might have been drawn from her seclusion by the temptation, not of a Prince Charming, but of a great catch for a poor girl, had never crossed the firm but thin mind of Richard's mother. (*CSS*, 185)

Richard Askew is indeed the Blue Prince American style, at least on the surface. Flawlessly handsome, well educated, and the only son in a family of considerable fortune, he is, according to his mother (and as Jane Austen universally acknowledged), in desperate need of a nice Victorian wife. Very far from the Victorian ideal of True Womanhood is Geraldine Plummer, the daughter of Mrs. Askew's half-sister. Being the niece of a philanthropist and the daughter of an eminent archaeologist, Geraldine is to her aunt "little less than an enigma in eugenics." (*CSS*, 186) Small and dark, and much less beautiful and charming than Mary Louise, Geraldine seems to possess other gifts that attract young men more than beauty. She is infuriated at the idea that her aunt has invited Mary Louise (Mrs. Askew's intentions are clear to everyone), so a confrontation between the two girls is predictable: "When I told her that Mary Louise reminded me of a violet, she inquired if I had provided a mossy stone." (*CSS*, 186) At the end of the story, Geraldine's joke will prove prophetic.

Mary Louise's looks (in spite of her old-fashioned dress) are perfect. Mr. Plummer and Richard stare at her in admiration, while Mrs. Askew is delighted to see that she perfectly matches her aesthetic ideal, "the living image of a Raphael Madonna — the thinnest of them." (*CSS*, 185) Apart from her ravishing beauty, Mary Louise has the adjoining qualities of delicacy, helplessness and submissiveness her previous generation had cultivated and which seem to please Mrs. Askew so much:

> The next instant I saw that Mary Louise had turned away from her hostess and was gazing up at the two men with an expression of eager deference, as if she were waiting to drink in wisdom from their lips. Yet when they spoke they said nothing remarkable, nothing that either Mrs. Askew or I might not have evolved from the common processes of intelligence . . . I had already discerned that she had little conversation, and that the little she had was spoken in the sentimental idiom of another century . . . Men of the Victorian age expected — or at least accepted — triteness as the penalty one paid for the combination of beauty and virtue; but would the rising generation conform submissively to the same standard of values? (*CSS*, 187-188)

The narrator's suspicions that Mary Louise's charms are far more effective on old-fashioned Mr. Plummer than on young Richard prove true after Richard starts inviting her to dances. Mary Louise dresses in a lovely white chiffon dress and is regarded by every young man as a beauty. Mrs. Askew expects her to be the reigning belle in all dances and dismisses Geraldine's remark that "everybody wanted to dance with her *once*" (*CSS*, 190; emphasis added) as a comment made out of envy for Mary Louise. After a week of dancing parties, Mary Louise twists her ankle and cannot dance any more until it is well. Although apparently she cannot walk without pain, she refuses to see a doctor and limps about the house, spending her afternoons in the sofa like a queen enthroned in domestic loveliness. Richard takes her for a ride in his car every afternoon, but does not keep her company in the drawing-room often. Instead, he plays

golf with Geraldine. Mr. Plummer, however, cannot resist complimenting the lovely invalid with books and flowers. To Mary Louise's adorable smile after she mentions that Mr. Plummer brought her "the most beautiful Ruskin", Geraldine responds sardonically "What's a Ruskin? . . . Do you make it with gin?" (*CSS*, 193)

A few days later, Mrs. Askew discovers that, after being repeatedly ignored in every dance, she decided to sprain her ankle to get some attention. As the narrator acknowledges, "she is using the only weapons she knows by instinct — those of another day." (*CSS*, 194) Unlike the lively and modern Geraldine, Mary Louise resorts to feigning invalidism as her mothers and grandmothers had done before. For her, it still constitutes a way to show Christian endurance of pain and a weapon to gain the sympathy and power she cannot attain otherwise. Although she pities poor Mary Louise, Glasgow suggests that young men (at least in this story) are no longer attracted to beauty when it is accompanied by an unnatural delicacy and intellectual shallowness:

> It used to be enough for a man just to sit still and look at a beautiful face; but today, as Richard says, there is so much else to do. Nobody wants to sit still, even with beauty, any longer. The age has a jazz temperament . . . That is why the really popular girl today is not the beauty like Mary Louise, but the comedienne like Geraldine. They are the same age, yet they are symbols of two different periods. (*CSS*, 195)

The ending of this story is again predictable. After Mary Louise's miraculous recovery, Geraldine insists on having a fancy dress party: Mary Louise wears the robes of an angel (harp and wings included) while Geraldine gets herself up as a devil. As usual, she becomes the life of the party and completely ignores Richard. After two days, Mrs. Askew receives the disastrous news: Richard and Geraldine went to Washington with an excuse and got married in secret. Although the intelligent and unconventional

Geraldine, as Linda Wagner contends, has "set her ambition too low" and is finally tamed into marriage and domesticity, she actively pursues her goal and controls the situation; she manages to marry Richard "against incredible odds."[6] Not her artless behaviour but her ability to use the arts of her generation has made her succeed in getting the man she loves.

In the story, Glasgow again points at the debilitating effects of women's upbringing in Victorian mores. Despite her youth, Mary Louise is still the perfect image of the selfless and helpless angel, whose whole existence is defined by her relationship to a male. Although in a more light-hearted tone, the author continues to denounce women's economic dependence on men and the consequent need to find a husband as negative to women's relationships, since they encourage competition instead of cooperation. Mary Louise loses the battle for Richard but she is not altogether unsuccessful in the husband-hunting affair. As Glasgow (this time comically) reminds the reader, Victorian codes of behaviour still apply, and the splendid beauty of a passive and submissive doll is still irresistible to some (intelligent?) men:

> 'With the older generation her methods are infallible; and, of course, all the time it was papa she was after.'
> 'Papa?'
> The faithful widower of a single wife for twenty years toppled with a crash from his pedestal. Another idol was shattered . . .
> 'But he is old enough to be her father!" I cried in horror. "Would she marry him?'
> Geraldine shrugged her shoulders.
> 'Well, he's the only archaeologist she knows, isn't he? And I warned Aunt Edmonia in the beginning that she should have to provide a mossy stone.'
> (*CSS*, 201)

[6] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 69.

* * *

"Romance and Sally Byrd" was first published in *Woman's Home Companion* in December 1924 and was reprinted in *World's Best Short Stories*, edited by William Johnston in 1925 (*CSS*, 238). The story reverts to the theme of conflicting relationships between men and women, and their contrast with mutually supporting relationships between women of different generations and backgrounds. Already in her fifties, as Richard Meeker points out in the editorial note to the story, (*CSS*, 238) Glasgow drew a brief outline of what was to become the major theme in her best works of fiction — *Barren Groun*d would be published the following year. "Romance and Sally Byrd" explores the moral, emotional, economic (and sometimes physical or mental) crippling that traditional male-female relationships bring about, and the much more fulfilling life a woman can achieve when she gives up traditional notions of romance.

Sally Byrd Littlepage is an innocent Virginia girl of nineteen who leads a grey life as a kindergarten teacher and dreams of marriage as an escape to her boredom and loneliness. As a lively young woman who dreams with passionate romance, life with her grandparents and her two unmarried aunts seems to her suffocating:

> Awaking in the morning with nothing to expect, falling asleep at night with nothing to dream about. Going out after breakfast to teach in the kindergarten of the public school, coming back after lunch to wait on Grandfather or Grandmother Littlepage. Breakfast, dinner, bed, that was all. Grandfather's worry about money; Grandmother's worry about meals; Aunt Louisa's worry about neuralgia; Aunt Matilda's worry about salvation. Just that and nothing else in her days. Drabness everywhere that she looked . . . She thought of marriage as her Grandfather thought of great wealth or her Aunt Matilda thought of heaven, as a passive and permanent condition of bliss. (*CSS*, 217-218)

The morning the story begins, she wakes up in ecstasy, thinking that period of her life has ended, and that everything will doubtless be different, since she is about to elope with Stanley to get married. Stanley Kenton is a famous New York writer whom Sally met in the local library, and three weeks have been sufficient to convince her to abandon her family and her job. Sally Byrd had always felt lonely and isolated, even as a child. While her family was poor and her neighbourhood was becoming less and less fashionable, her grandparents had clung to their lost status. They had never let her play with "the common children" (*CSS*, 218) and her childhood was spent sewing with her aunts in the gloomy drawing-room of her decaying home. Her aunts' embittered and depressing life as parasitic spinsters, we assume, is a painful reminder to Sally Byrd of what could become of her should she waste her youth and beauty by devoting herself to her family instead of trying to find a husband:

> She [Aunt Matilda] was a pale, long, narrow woman, whose ideas were embalmed in religion as if it were a preserving fluid. Her features had once been pretty and aristocratic, and there was a legend that she had been in love with an infidel in her youth. She suffered day and night from a sense of sin, and if possible she was a more depressing companion than Aunt Louisa, who suffered day and night from neuralgia. (*CSS*, 219)

Glasgow provides Sally with two adult examples of wasted womanhood, which the reader can easily identify with other portraits of female characters in Glasgow's novels and short fiction. Aunt Louisa is featured as the conventional invalid spinster, who resorts to neuralgia as a means to gain sympathy and attention, while Aunt Matilda embodies the pious woman who has (involuntarily) traded an unsuitable lover for a more socially acceptable devotion to God.

That morning, Sally puts on her Sunday dress and goes to the park, where Stanley is waiting for her, although he receives her with stunning news. Stanley had imagined (though he had never told her) that she knew he was married, and that his wife might not be willing to grant him a divorce. She of course refuses to go away with him, but promises to love him and wait for him always. Her inexperience and her romantic inclinations forbid her even to be angry with him: "Oh, you can't know how much better it is to have an unhappy love in your life than to have nothing at all." (*CSS*, 225) From that day, Sally goes back to her former unfulfilling life, but this time having a tragic love affair to think about every night. Although Glasgow mocks the melodramatic way in which Sally portrays her youthful infatuation, the scene points at Sally's inability to find a meaning to her life without romance. By wishing to be as different as possible from her aunts, also stigmatised by their spinsterhood, she has unconsciously fallen in the same patriarchal trap. Her potential opportunities of self-development and self-realisation are invalidated by her relationship with a man in the same way that Aunt Louisa's invalidism is caused by the lack of it.

After some months, Sally Byrd comes across Gerty Cunningham, a distant relative of Stanley's, who tells her that he has had a very serious car accident and it seems he is probably going to lose his eyesight. The friend who accompanied him had died in the accident. Now that Stanley needs her more than ever, she reflects, she must go to him at once. She leaves with an excuse and catches the night train to New York, and arrives at Stanley's fashionable apartment in the early morning, telling everyone she is the nurse. While she waits in the living-room, she is received by a middle-aged woman whom she takes to be a sister or an aunt of Stanley's:

> She met the astonished regard of a dark, pleasant-looking woman, whose hair, just sprinkled with gray, was brushed carelessly back from her forehead, and whose large, firm figure was beginning ever so slightly to spread. She wore the serene air of a woman who has passed through the furnace of romance, and has attained the cool judgement and the ample leisure which await those who have finished with love. (*CSS*, 231)

Mrs. Kenton (obviously Stanley's wife) gently offers her a cup of coffee and observes that she is too young to be a nurse. When Sally Byrd tells her the truth about her and Stanley (which she already knows), Mrs. Kenton tells Sally that she is neither the first nor the last woman in Stanley's life: he had asked her for a divorce (knowing that she would refuse) in order to marry the woman who was killed in the accident. "Men are so careless about their things" (*CSS*, 231), Mrs. Kenton acidly remarks while mending Stanley's socks: although they have been separated for three years, Stanley has sent for her every time he has been in trouble, and abandoned her afterwards. "Marriage for some men", Ellen Glasgow seems to voice through Mrs. Kenton, "is merely a prop to lean against when they need support." (*CSS*, 232) Mrs. Kenton has managed to get over romance successfully, even if it has been at a very high cost. Mrs. Kenton's wise and tender advice to Sally Byrd immediately reminds the reader of Dorinda Oakley's words in *Barren Ground* after she is deserted by her lover; both women embody the role model for strong female characters Glasgow was to picture again and again in her forthcoming works of fiction:

> 'At nineteen nothing is permanent. You will forget him and be happy.'
> Sally Byrd shook her head. 'I shall forget, but I shall not be happy. It has broken my heart.'
> A wistful expression crossed the other's face. 'No, your heart isn't broken, so long as it hurts. When your heart is really broken, it lies still and dead like mine. You can't imagine the relief it is,' she added simply, 'to have your heart break at last.' (*CSS*, 233)

Mrs. Kenton's words prove true when, in the train back to Virginia, Sally repeats to herself in great distress that she is finished with love forever. While she imagines an empty future of school and church work "until she grew old and stingy as Aunt Matilda and Aunt Louisa" (*CSS*, 237), she happens to meet a handsome young man who lives only some blocks away from her house and realises that Stanley was "not exactly old, but middle-aged." (*CSS*, 237) Sally Byrd is saved and her affair with Stanley will soon be forgotten, Glasgow hopes, but she has had to lie to her family and sell her mother's locket to pay for the train ticket back to Virginia — for Stanley's sake. Again, relationships with men prove emotionally crippling and destructive for women, and the help and understanding of other women is offered as an alternative to self-effacement and helplessness. Mrs. Kenton's advice has been useful to save Sally (and probably other girls) from that self-destruction, but she has attained this bitter knowledge at the price of a broken heart and a lifelong dependence on a worthless man.

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"The Professional Instinct" was written between 1918 and 1925, and the twenty-three pages of corrections Glasgow left in her manuscript are preserved in the University of Virginia Library (*CSS*, 253). For my analysis of this story I will use the edited version by Richard K. Meeker, which includes all the manuscript corrections and corrects all the original typographical mistakes. According to Meeker, the final typescript with the manuscript corrections was found folded in thirds, suggesting that Glasgow intended to

send it for publication. “The Professional Instinct” was first published by William W. Kelly in *Western Humanities Review* in 1962, just a year before Meeker’s edition.

Since this is the last story published by Ellen Glasgow, by the time of its publication its characters and themes had already become stereotypes in her fiction. Dr. John Estbridge is the (by now) classical middle-aged professional absorbed by his career and embittered by a life void of passion and adventure. The first scene in the story shows Estbridge having his breakfast on Christmas Day and regretting that holidays and snow will bring more patients to his hospital. While he looks through the window to his backyard, he remembers how he had intended to transform it into an Italian garden in his youth, but now a solitary ailanthus tree stands as a reminder of his broken dreams:

> That was nearly twenty years ago, for [Esterbridge *changed to* Estbridge] had relinquished his garden with the other dreams of his youth, and to-day the [vigorous *changed to* brawny] ailantus [tree *deleted*] stood [there *added*] as a symbol of the prosperous failure of his career. (*CSS*, 239)

What Estbridge seems to be regretting more than any other thing is the failure of his professional career. Although he is a successful doctor, he feels unrewarded because the Chair of Physiology at the university has been given to a Dr. Adamson who used to be his assistant, when he expected that honour for himself. His bitterness takes him to think of his wife Tilly, who seems to have encouraged him to improve in his profession, but whom he describes as a domineering monster. To him, his wife’s constant support (which is supposed to be the proper duty of a Victorian wife) has been a curse, and he consistently blames her for his disappointment, instead of blaming his own frustrated ambitions:

> Florid, robust, and bristling with activity, she had triumphantly check-mated him during the twenty years of his marriage. So relentless had been her rule, that her victim, though still at bay, had been forced to accord a critical admiration to her performance. But for her amazing perseverance, he thought now, his whole life might have been different, and instead of missing the coveted chair of physiology at the University, he might have watched some of his early dreams acquire the outlines and [the semblance of *changed to* substance] of [realities *changed to* reality.] . . . Yes, she had always been at his elbow, holding him back. It was incredible; it was diabolical; but she had done it for twenty years, and she was doing it still! (*CSS*, 240-241)

Breakfast time, which had usually been the only time when he could be at home unmolested — Mrs. Estbridge has developed "a convenient neurosis" (*CSS*, 241) which keeps her intermittently in bed during breakfast — is interrupted by his wife's sudden appearance. She tells him that she can already wake up for breakfast and had planned this as a surprise for him, but Estbridge takes it as a wicked manoeuvre to deprive him of his only time of solace: "Not content with destroying his happiness, she was opening, with the best possible intentions, an attack upon the intellectual side of his work." (*CSS*, 242) Although Mrs. Estbridge has fulfilled all the duties domestic tradition demanded, the feminine virtues his generation idealised now seem to hold the blame for his failures: "her authority was rooted in virtue, and before the tyranny of virtue he was hopeless." (*CSS*, 242)

After learning that Timothy Pratt, an uncle of Tilly's, had opposed to Estbridge's appointment to the position, he goes to his office and resolves to give a complete change to his life and accept a position that has been offered to him in Shanghai. Although he is approaching fifty, the double moral standard is again at work; he feels strong and capable enough to start a new and rewarding life, becoming suddenly aware that "he looked at least ten years younger than the capable lady whom he had married. Science

had kept him young . . . In his bright blue eyes . . . still glistened the eternal enquiring spirit of youth." (*CSS*, 242-243) What Estbridge's myopia does not allow him to see is the fact that his youth has perhaps been preserved at the cost of his wife's self-effacement.

While thoughts of Shanghai are still in his mind, Judith Campbell comes to bring him her last book as a Christmas present. Judith is Professor of Philosophy at a college for women but, to Estbridge's opinion, the male world of professions has not spoiled her femininity: "she was as feminine in appearance as any early Victorian heroine of fiction." (*CSS*, 245-246) Apart from her appearance, and regardless of her college education and a successful professional life, Judith unfortunately fulfils other male ideals of Victorian womanhood. Despite her intellect, her softness and delicacy give her a "spiritual detachment to stand above the more commonplace aspects of passion" (*CSS*, 246):

> She was, he realized forcibly at the instant, everything that his wife was not and could never become. His wife was a dull woman with an instinct to dominate; but Judith Campbell - he felt this as he had never felt it before - was clever woman with an instinct to yield. (*CSS*, 246)

Thus, Judith's success in her profession, Glasgow suggests, has not transformed her into a New Woman: in essence, she continues to be as dependent of male approval and protection as Mildred Beckwith in "Dare's Gift". Like Mildred, Judith's value is judged not according to her capacity to think for herself but for her ability to sacrifice herself for (male) others. Judith has been offered the presidency of Hartwell College in Saint Louis, and Estbridge is aware that she had always wanted such a position as the culmination of all her professional aspirations. Nevertheless, as his own ambitions have

failed, he hopes that Judith will yield to his flirtatious attempts and refuse her post in Saint Louis to go away with him to Shanghai:

> 'If I could only give you what I have.'
> 'And yet it is the highest honor that could come to you.' . . .
> 'That is why I would give it to you.' . . .
> 'Would you stay - would you give it up if I asked you?' The glow in her face seemed to pervade her whole body while she stood before him transfigured.
> 'I would give up the whole world if you asked me.'
> 'You would sacrifice your ambition - your future?'
> A laugh broke from her lips. 'I haven't any ambition - any future - except yours.' It was as if the passive substance of her nature had flamed into energy. (*CSS*, 248)

Estbridge gives Judith an hour to pack her suitcase and meet him at the train station, apparently because they might change their opinion if they were allowed some time to think. As Estbridge reflects: "they must follow with bandaged eyes the spirit of adventure." (*CSS*, 249) As he gives a final look to his papers, his "spirit of adventure" does not allow him to think of the two women who have sacrificed their personal ambitions to support his.

Just as Estbridge is about to leave his office for the train station, his friend and colleague Jim Hoadly suddenly appears — it is revealing to notice how Hoadly knows he will find him in his office and not at home, even on Christmas Day. Estbridge is forced to tell his friend about his plan of going to Shanghai with Judith, and Hoadly tries to make him think of its consequences, which is precisely the last thing the self-centred Estbridge wants to do:

> 'Ask yourself what the lady is giving up in return for the doubtful constancy you offer her . . . You realize that your wife will never divorce you?'
> With a shrug Estbridge went back to his papers. 'Have I lived with her for twenty years without discovering that?'
> 'And the end will be, I suppose,' Hoadly's voice had grown rasping, 'that you will feel yourself bound to Judith Campbell until — until she comes

> between you and something that you want more than you want any woman. There is an instinct in you stronger than love, Jack, and God pity her when she crosses it.' (*CSS*, 252)

Before he leaves, Jim Hoadly asks Estbridge whether he knows about Adamson, and Estbridge thinks his friend is referring to his appointment to the Chair of Physiology. The real news is that he has been run over by a car and hence he needs to be substituted. In the face of Estbrigde's astonishment, his friend ironically reminds him that he has only fifteen minutes left to arrive at the station on time. Of course, Estbridge will not catch that train.

Glasgow's bitter ending of the story seems to be a grim substantiation to Glasgow's view that women's emotional dependence on men often has tragic consequences. John Estbridge embodies the self-centred and materialistic male who never acknowledges his wife's self-sacrifice for the sake of his comfort, and who is morally incapable of assuming the responsibility of his own failures. Since Tilly is no longer an inspiration and an ideal to him, but a human being with a practical mind (perhaps even more practical than her husband's), she automatically becomes the cause of his unhappiness. By dutifully managing the household and encouraging his success in the public sphere, taking care of his clothes, his diet and his health as a good wife should, Tilly Estbridge (one cannot help thinking of Lady Macbeth) seems to have exerted an evil influence which has destroyed all the goodness in him. Ironically, as Estbridge's wise friend Jim Hoadly reminds him, he has come to hate the image of his own selfish desires, as Tilly has become precisely the perfect complement to his professional career: "He had loved Tilly, not for herself, but because she had shown him his own image. Like most men,

[and all *changed to* according to the] analytical psychologists, he had identified his own dreams with the shape of a woman." (*CSS*, 240) Estbridge thus comes to form part of Glasgow's gallery of stereotyped males who corset women into an ideal that pleases their eyes, and abandon them once this ideal is not satisfied. Estbridge's new inspiration, Judith Campbell, soon loses her power when the Chair of Physiology is within his reach. Despite the fact that he shows no remorse in abandoning his wife, and that they might never marry, Judith does not hesitate to relinquish her highest professional aspiration to follow the man she loves, and shows woman's constructed tendency to see herself as "lacking" or, for the purpose of my analysis, in-valid, without a male gaze in which to mirror herself. Jim Hoadly's (rhetorical) question to Estbridge is self-explanatory enough to provide a final comment to this story: "Have you thought to tell her that the only thing you ever loved in any woman was your own reflection?" (*CSS*, 251)

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By way of conclusion, Glasgow's stories reflect the author's own battle with her past. By revising feminine traditions and giving them new significance, the author also comes to terms with the traditions previous generations of Southern women had embraced, while melting these traditions with her own individual identity as a woman and as a writer. Sympathy towards her mother and her sister Cary as victims of the ideal of separate spheres, together with her own anxieties about her long relationship with Henry Anderson and her gradual realisation that she found female companionship more fulfilling, shape the tone of the subjects she explores in her short fiction.

The female entrapped by Victorian notions of womanhood and isolated within the iron gates of the domestic cannot but resort to the silent protest of neuralgia and chronic invalidism as a response to the constrictions of domestic roles. Invalidism and illness, as Glasgow's stories succeed in portraying, has (at least) two faces to it: while Mrs. Maradick or Mildred Beckwith are depicted as victims of the Victorian ideal of separate spheres, characters like Mary Louise Littleton, Fanny French Buford or Aunt Louisa Littlepage make themselves ill as a response to a feeling of redundancy and inadequacy. Even those who manipulate their health for their individual purposes achieve their goals at the high cost of losing their sense of self.

In her stories, Glasgow ascertains the potential power for change when women create mutually enriching bonds of affection and understanding. In the marriage stories, self-effacing wives like Tilly Estbridge, Margaret Fleming or Mrs. Stanley Kenton portray the evils of marriage as an institution that, as Pamela Matthews contends, exploits and victimises women.[7] Even in the stories with a fairy-tale ending, Glasgow cannot help to see beyond the conventional "and they lived happily ever after", simply because she has little faith in it. As Matthews remarks, some of Glasgow's marriage stories illustrate how women sometimes participate in their own victimisation for the sake of love: characters like Lucy Smith, Margaret French and Judith Campbell testify to that. Even New Women like Geraldine Plummer are tamed into domesticity.

The marriage stories served Glasgow to argue against the marginalisation and selflessness that marriage entails and to evidence the degrading aspects of the husband-hunting game, especially the competition of two women for the affection of a man. The

[7] Ibid., 32.

frustrating struggle between Margaret Fleming and Rose Morrison over George Fleming, or the equally useless sacrifices of Tilly Estbridge and Judith Campbell for John Estbridge help to make Glasgow's point in favour of an alternative to the romance plot. Mrs. Kenton's bitter experience with marriage, for instance, saves the innocent Sally Byrd (or, at least, we hope so) from future disasters in her encounters with men. In the Gothic stories, Mrs. Roland Maradick, Mrs. Roger Vanderbridge and the other female characters find comfort and understanding not in their husbands but in a stranger, a female double with whom they align by intuition rather than through reason, and with whom they can form a spiritual connection without objectification, marginalisation or loss of self. As Anne Williams argues, the female Gothic tradition revealed women's disruptive potential, and consistently served women writers like Glasgow to show

> what such madwomen may eventually do; escape [the attic] and burn the house down, [or] if not reviled and demonised as "other", the female may not merely assist in redecorating the ancient house, but effect a major structural renovation. She might, indeed, make the house a home.[8]

[8] Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of the Gothic* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 249.

5.4. Fighting with the "Angel(a)s": *The Builders* (1919).

Summary of the Novel Discussed in this Section:

- ***The Builders* (1919)**

The novel is set in 1916, at the onset of the American participation in World War I. Nurse Caroline Meade is leading a monotonous existence in Southside Virginia, when a letter arrives requesting her for a post at Briarlay, the Blackburn household. David Blackburn is a self-made man of aristocratic origins who was denied an education because of his family's decline in wealth, but who improved his social position by studying and working hard. He is the owner of a prosperous steel factory in Richmond and has now embarked on a promising political career. Caroline is to nurse Letty, the frail young daughter of Blackburn and his lovely and delicate wife Anna Jeannette. Mrs. Blackburn is called Angelica because her features are so perfect that she looks like an angel. Angelica accuses her husband of having an affair with Caroline and physically abusing her, while she charms her sister-in-law's wealthy fiancé Alan Wythe. The rumours of violence and adultery ruin David's political aspirations and allow Angelica to divorce him without any damage to her reputation. Both men decide to fight in France, but while David returns from the war, Alan is killed. The novel ends with Caroline's departure for service as a nurse in France, and a dubious future reconciliation between David and Angelica for the sake of their daughter's well being.

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> *Friends and neighbors thought the Glasgows a morbid family, and the children may have inherited more than guilt from their mother. The oldest daughter, Emily, allegedly suffered from bouts of mania, and the four youngest children, Cary, Frank, Ellen, and Rebe, from depression . . . Glasgow had a fascination with psychology and was the first to recognize that not only her mind and character were affected by her mother's illness; it also shaped her future life.* [9]

As has already been mentioned in previous chapters, Anne Gholson's nervous breakdown deeply affected the young Glasgow, and probably remained in her unconscious as a painful reminder of her own condition. As Marcelle Thiebaux points out, her mother's "distraught murmuring throughout the night darkened Glasgow's childhood."[10] To my mind, Glasgow's literary production during this period, and especially *The Builders* (1919), attempted to exorcise the haunting presence of invalidism that pervaded her entire life.[11] Although the quality of *The Builders* may be inferior to that of more celebrated novels like *Barren Ground* or *The Sheltered Life*, it nevertheless illustrates the author's continuing evolution towards her notions of female bonding, and clearly exposes her ambiguous relationship with both illness and *dis*-ease.

After the publication of *Virginia*, and with the exception of *Life and Gabriella* (1916), which enjoyed great popular success, Glasgow's production during these years is regarded by most critics as "minor." A clear precedent of Dorinda Oakley in *Barren Ground*, *Life and Gabriella* features a strong and self-assertive female protagonist who succeeds in

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[9] Susan Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography* (Baltimore and London: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 19.
[10] Marcelle Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982) 12.
[11] Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 17. As Goodman states, "from her mother, Glasgow learned debilitating lessons about womanhood . . . A woman's charm (and power) lay in her innocence (or ignorance), her ability to suffer in silence, her piety, and her devotion to family, servants, and the poor."

overcoming a failed marriage to an unworthy man and forges an independent future for herself in New York. Glasgow subsequently produced the pieces of short fiction discussed in the previous chapter and published two more novels, both of which were regarded as poorer in quality by critics and proved less successful among readers. Of the two novels, *The Builders* and *One Man in His Time* (1922), the former is particularly relevant as regards my analysis, since it introduces another of Glasgow's "Angel(a)s", the beautiful and cruel Angelica Blackburn.

Glasgow's personal experience during the years between *Virginia* (1913) and *Barren Ground* (1925) was again filled with losses in her family, as well as with strong relationships that often brought conflicting feelings. Following her sister Cary's death, Glasgow moved to a New York apartment for a short period, but returned to Richmond upon the deaths of her sister Emily Glasgow Houston (again, from cancer)[12] and of her father Francis Glasgow in January 1916. In June 1917, her sister Annie Glasgow Clark unexpectedly suffered a heart attack and died within a short period. Anne Virginia Bennett, who had been living in the house for six years — first to nurse Cary during her illness and later to tend to Mr. Glasgow — agreed to stay in a now empty One West Main as Glasgow's secretary and nurse. Glasgow was to remain at the family home for the rest of her life.

Simultaneously, World War I affected Glasgow at a very personal level. Colonel Lieutenant Henry Watkins Anderson, her fiancé at the time *The Builders* was being written,

[12] Critics do not seem to agree on the exact death of Emily's death. Susan Goodman states that she died in 1913 (see Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 137). In contrast, Pamela Matthews contends that Emily died late in 1915 (see Matthews, *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Traditions* (Charlottesville and London: the University Press of Virginia, 1994) 88. Linda Wagner does not specify a date, but implies her death occurred close to that of Francis Glasgow: see Wagner, *Ellen Glasgow: Beyond Convention* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982) 8.

left for Romania in 1917.[13] Anne Virginia Bennett volunteered for Red Cross duty and was also sent to Europe from 1918 to 1920. Her engagement to Anderson (the Harold S— of her autobiography) forced her to confront the potential consequences of marriage and define her position about traditional heterosexual relationships in general. In 1907 she had become engaged to the handsome Reverend Frank Ilsley Paradise, but the engagement was broken after three years. Contrasting with Glasgow's more serious commitment to Anderson, her autobiography describes her engagement to Paradise as "experimental" (*WW*, 178), thus suggesting she never really seemed to contemplate the possibility of marrying him.

The Builders constitutes an interesting insight into Glasgow's relationship to the cult of invalidism, especially if one considers the above-mentioned events at the time Glasgow was writing the novel. Thiebaux posits that "the characters in *The Builders* are too stereotypically ranged within the camps of good and evil to be interesting, and it remains an inferior work."[14] However, I believe that the portraits of both male and female characters often reveal the author's contradictory feelings towards normative relationships between men and women and traditional notions of womanhood. Thus, the apparently unambiguous differences between characters are not as clear-cut as they first appear, as I will attempt to illustrate in the next few pages.

The Builders (1919), as many Glasgow scholars have noted, draws its political emphasis on the ideas held by Henry Anderson. The male protagonist, David Blackburn, is engaged in a

[13] More details about their long and troubled relationship will be provided throughout this chapter. However, further information on this issue can be read, for example, in Blair Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962) 24; Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 147; or Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 89.

[14] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 73.

political career that aims at making the South progress by bringing it out of its isolation. Blair Rouse among others asserts that many of Glasgow's conversations with Anderson about political issues are the basic material for Blackburn's letters and monologues, and that the character was clearly modelled after him. Rouse describes *The Builders* as "a poor novel", which in his opinion was "made poorer because of its involvement in vague, muddled political emphasis."[15] Auchincloss similarly argues that Glasgow's affair with Anderson "produced her worst novel, if a political tract full of Wilsonian idealism can be called a novel at all."[16]

Glasgow had met Anderson on Easter Sunday 1916, and their conflicted relationship continued intermittently for some twenty years. According to the data provided by several critics,[17] she became engaged to Anderson on July 19, 1917, on the eve of his departure to Romania as the Chairman to a Red Cross Commission. In her biography of the author, Goodman writes that Anderson chivalrously "parted from Glasgow — as he would the next year from another woman — by dropping to his knees and kissing the hem of her skirt."[18] During his stay in Europe, his scarce letters, along with rumours of his possible affair with Queen Marie of Romania, placed Glasgow in an uncomfortable position. Queen Marie was known for her stunning beauty, although she was also notorious for her numerous love affairs.[19] The Queen unfailingly campaigned to raise funds for the war victims and, together with Anderson, she toured hospitals distributing goods in a Red Cross uniform. Goodman argues that Queen Marie's youth, her beauty, and her image of selfless piety appealed to

[15] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 23-24.
[16] Louis Auchincloss, *Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965) 73.
[17] See, for example, Susan Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 148; or Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, xii.
[18] Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 148.
[19] Ibid., 148. According to Goodman, comments on Queen Marie's "film-star beauty" went together with a reputation of being "the most promiscuous woman in Europe."

Anderson's "notions of true womanhood."[20] Upon Anderson's return from Europe, their relationship was evidently altered by time and, above all, by the circumstances surrounding Anderson's stay in Romania. According to various sources, Glasgow presumably attempted suicide with an overdose of sleeping pills after an evening encounter with Anderson on July 3, 1918.[21] Wagner interestingly points out that Glasgow

> was conscious throughout of the cultural pressure to marry Anderson. Such was a woman's role. No matter what his motives or his earlier experiences, no matter that he had a flirtatious nature, Ellen Glasgow — particularly Ellen Glasgow in her mid-forties — *should* have been eager to accept him.[22]

Relatives and acquaintances very probably thought that Glasgow — by then a middle-aged, almost 'hopeless' spinster — indeed should have considered herself lucky to marry an attractive, intelligent, and respected man as Anderson. Glasgow eventually broke the engagement after a period of continual quarrels and endless discussions about marriage although, according to Goodman, "the engagement had never been formally dissolved."[23] Glasgow and Anderson continued to be friends until the author's death and he remained a habitual dinner guest at One West Main, despite Bennett's extreme dislike of him. Considering the evidence provided by different scholars and Anderson's views on gender

[20] Ibid., 149. Goodman reproduces an extract from a letter of Queen Marie to Henry Anderson, dated February 6, 1919, which provides an apt example of her usual discourse: "I am no more at all a selfish woman, I certainly in this war have learned to live for others, entirely and uncomplainingly."

[21] Details about this episode are provided, among others, by Julius Rowan Raper, *From the Sunken Garden: The Fiction of Ellen Glasgow, 1916-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) 38; and Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, xii.

[22] Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 59. [emphasis added]

[23] Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 157.

roles, I believe that Glasgow truly enjoyed Anderson's company and conversation, but she probably sensed that marriage to him would have proved disastrous.[24]

The novel is set in 1916, at the onset of the American participation in World War I. The strong and independent protagonist, nurse Caroline Meade, has overcome a failed love affair and leads a monotonous existence in Southside Virginia. She is hoping for "something different" (*TB*, 6) to bring a change to her tedious life, when a letter arrives requesting her for a post at Briarlay, the Blackburn household. David Blackburn is a self-made man of aristocratic origins who was denied and education because of his family's decline in wealth, but who improved his social position by studying and working hard. He is the owner of a prosperous steel factory in Richmond and has now embarked on a promising political career. Caroline is to nurse Letty, the frail young daughter of Blackburn and his lovely and delicate wife Anna Jeannette, called Angelica because her features are so perfect that she looks like an angel.[25] Caroline is thrilled by this sudden shift in her situation, although she has heard rumours that Blackburn mistreats his wife and — contrary to the dominant political tendency in the South — votes Republican.

Like nurse Margaret Randolph in "The Shadowy Third" (1916), Caroline's idea of Angelica's loveliness and victimisation generates an unconscious identification with her

[24] Ibid., 157. Goodman's quotation from one of Anderson's letters to Glasgow's biographer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings (dated January 1953) seems to clarify some of the reasons for the author's scepticism about marrying him. Anderson believed "that women are happier where the dominance of the man in the relationship is recognized . . . I do not like weak men, nor do I like women who are too aggressive."

[25] Ibid., 172. Goodman contends that the character of Angelica Blackburn was partially drawn from her sister-in-law Margaret Elizabeth Branch, her brother Arthur's wife. She came from a distinguished family, and her beauty had apparently impressed even King Edward VII. According to Goodman, Glasgow possibly disliked Margaret partly "because of her good looks" and partly because she occupied her time "raising orchids and serving on the boards of charities." Because of Margaret's long periods of convalescence, "many people believed that Glasgow had used her as a model for *The Builders*' neurasthenic Angelica Blackburn."

employer. Before they actually meet, Caroline often finds herself thinking about Angelica and imagining what she must be like: "it was incredible the way a woman whose face she had never seen had entered into her life . . . 'she is more real than anything', she thought in surprise. 'She is more real even than the war.'" (*TB*, 18) Upon her arrival at Briarlay, she is stunned at the sight of Angelica's beauty, which even outshines the image she had conceived in her imagination. Anticipating Miss Wrenn's first meeting with her employer Mrs. Vanderbridge in "The Past", which would be published a year after *The Builders*, Caroline immediately creates a attachment with Angelica, which she describes as "different from anything that had ever happened to her before." (*TB*, 38) In turn, Angelica's welcoming words again forestall "The Past" — "You look so kind and so competent, and I feel that I can rely on you" (*TB*, 39) — and initially promise a potentially empowering relationship of mutual support that will bring self-fulfilment to both women. Caroline's promise to do her best in nursing Letty immediately becomes "a vow of dedication" and feels that "the bond between them assumed the nature and the obligation of a covenant." (*TB*, 40) As she confides to her mother in her first letter from Briarlay,

> I have never in my life met any one who attracted me so strongly in the beginning. It is years since I have felt my sympathy so completely drawn out by a stranger. I feel that I would do anything in the world that I could for her . . . I believe that she needs help and understanding as much as any one I ever saw. (*TB*, 60)

Glasgow pictures Caroline as "almost masculine" (*TB*, 13) in appearance, while her rationality and her dislike of melodrama and excessive emotion also endow her with traditionally 'masculine' qualities. In contrast, Angelica's combination of exquisite looks and extreme delicacy makes her embody the icon of conventional femininity to perfection. To my mind, Caroline's attraction to her fragile and seemingly victimised employer is, at least in

some measure, based on Caroline's (even if unconscious) belief that an angelic appearance is evidence of a virtuous disposition. The reader assumes that Caroline has also been socialised into accepting that male-defined standard, and is thus drawn to Angelica by a desire to protect and comfort her in her plight.[26] She acknowledges that "more than her beauty, the sweetness of her look, the appeal of her delicacy, of her feminine weakness, went straight to the heart." (*TB*, 39) Raper argues that Caroline's identification with Angelica resides in the fact that "she personifies the frustrated dreams of Caroline's thirty-two years."[27] Given the meanness that Glasgow unveils in Angelica, I believe it is more likely that the author meant this character to inspire Caroline's pity rather than to symbolise her desires and ambitions. As I contended earlier in this chapter, Glasgow's conflicted views of conventional femininity in general and the cult of invalidism in particular emerge in *The Builders* through the characters of Caroline and Angelica. As Thiebaux posits, Glasgow sympathised with (and was somehow attracted to) the appealing delicacy of the Belles of bygone days, even though she openly rejected the helplessness and self-effacement that this ideal implied:

> her own ambivalence surfaces, for she had an emotional preference for . . . the gracious women of her mother's generation . . . Her ideal was the responsible, intelligent woman who had something to occupy her mind yet who still retained an aura of Victorian grace and a ladylike dignity about sex.[28]

In *The Builders*, Glasgow thus focuses again on female characters in order to denounce those aspects of normative womanhood that had crippled the lives of past (and present) generations of women she had known. However, Blair Rouse states that "it is not clear

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[26] Julius Rowan Raper also comments on this aspect. See Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, 39.

[27] Ibid., 39.
[28] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 6-7.

. . . that any of her closest intimates among the women she knew in Richmond exercised any direct influence upon her art as a novelist. But several of her male acquaintances did have such an influence."[29] It is certainly striking to read that the editor of Glasgow's letters disregards the enormous impact that female bonding had in Glasgow's life and fiction, which precisely constitutes an important feature of *The Builders* as well. Pamela Matthews draws attention to the fact that critics have abundantly discussed the influence that Anderson's political stance had in the characterisation of David Blackburn, while they have overlooked the equally significant impact that Bennett had in Glasgow's modelling of the female protagonist. In Matthews' view, *The Builders* "suggests the importance of women's complex friendships . . . where they both promise fulfilment and invite conflict."[30] I would argue that the novel explores Glasgow's own dilemma between choosing romance (Anderson) and female companionship (Bennett), while it reveals the destructive potential of relationships among women when hampered by male intervention.

Despite Caroline's attachment and complete devotion to Mrs. Blackburn, she gradually realises that Angelica cannot imagine companionship or cooperation between two women. Angelica's complete adherence to Victorian definitions of femininity has conditioned her to believe that the only possible relationship with other women is one of competition and rivalry over a man. As is the case with the other "Angel(a)s" of Glasgow's fiction, her appearance of loveliness and her seemingly delicate health cause everyone to regard her as virtuous and self-sacrificing, when she is in fact cruel and manipulative. Rouse states that one of the novel's weaknesses is that it "anticipates such domestic melodrama as

[29] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 22.

[30] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 89-90.

that in Daphne du Maurier's Rebecca"[31], but he acknowledges that the portrait of Angelica is among the literary achievements in the novel.

In the first chapters of the novel, the flawlessness of Angelica's features, "as if her head and shoulders had been chiselled in marble" (*TB*, 38), already anticipates that such perfection can only be artificial. In turn, her identification with marble bears connotations of hardness, coldness and death. Angelica despises her husband and does not really love her daughter: she only married Blackburn because he was the richest man in Richmond. As Mrs. Colfax tells Caroline, Angelica's family was poor and she was even trained to become a teacher, but she instead "sold herself" (*TB*, 32) to the luxuries that marriage to a rich man would afford her. She makes people believe that her husband is aggravating her fragile health by forcing her to do charity work for the war victims, when it is really Caroline and Angelica's poor relative Matty Timberlake who do all the sewing and knitting for her.

Mrs. Timberlake, the unpaid housekeeper at Briarlay, is an instance of the helplessness of women who, being dispossessed and economically dependent on relatives, are forced to resort to parasitism or drudgery for a living. Glasgow's description of her as a "neuralgic woman" who has "a look which seemed to complain always that she was poor and dependent and nobody noticed her" (*TB*, 37) immediately recalls Kesiah Blount in *The Miller of Old Church*. Although Angelica tyrannises over Matty just as Angela Gay does over her sister, all four women are the product of the same patriarchal standard that keeps them caged in domesticity.

The novel later discloses that Angelica never desired to have children: as Mrs. Timberlake tells Caroline, "I never saw anyone hate to have a child as much as Angelica did .

[31] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 85.

. . She carried on like a crazy woman about it." (*TB*, 145) Letty is described as a frail child who — much like Glasgow herself — shares the delicate appearance of her mother but has inherited her father's eyes and strong personality. As a reminder of the revenant child Dorothea in Glasgow's story "The Shadowy Third", Letty has the otherworldly, "rather elfish look of children who have been ill from the cradle." Similarly, her pensive expression and her words reveal a bitter knowledge that is unusual in a child and that again recall Dorothea: "she talks exactly like an old person sometimes." (*TB*, 70) Angelica's lack of affection for her daughter is shown early in the novel: while Blackburn always finds "time for a talk" despite his numerous occupations, her mother "is so busy helping the soldiers she hasn't time to talk to you." (*TB*, 89-90)

It is really her father, together with the small community of female employees at Briarlay (Caroline, Mrs. Timberlake, and old Mammy Riah) who provide Letty with affection and comfort. Significantly, Caroline also finds support in Matty and Mammy Riah during Letty's period of illness and afterwards: Matty overcomes her perpetual reserve and comes to love her "almost as if you were my own child" (*TB*, 208), while Mammy Riah takes care of her "de same ez I look atter Letty." (*TB*, 293) Caroline realises about Mrs. Blackburn's "thin and colourless soul" (*TB*, 150) as the child's cold gets worse: although Angelica pretends to be distressed by the news, she calmly continues to eat her breakfast, comfortably propped up by her feathered cushions. The night Letty is terribly ill with a life-threatening pneumonia crisis, everyone is overcome with anguish, while Angelica prefers to act in a charity tableaux rather than staying with her daughter. She impresses everyone with her magnificent looks and her photograph appears in several magazines. Her brother Roane

Fitzhugh describes her as "a stunner" and reports that "the *Washington Examiner* spoke of her as the most beautiful woman in Virginia." (*TB*, 181)

In order to elude the responsibility for her actions, she lets everyone believe that her husband had kept the truth about Letty's state from her. What is considered by several critics as her outmost demonstration of cruelty and selfishness[32] is, to my mind, another instance of her internalisation (and her entrapment) within the male-defined roles she is expected to fulfil. As the epitome of womanly perfection, she performs another facet of her artificial self as a beautiful — though lifeless — object to be admired, which highlights her inability to define her identity as other than a reflection of the male gaze. Ironically, the same principle that consecrates the roles of wife and mother as the 'natural' *raison d'être* of the True Woman has transformed Angelica in an artificial selfish/selfless being that is incapable of loving her husband or even her daughter.

Like Angela Gay in *The Miller of Old Church*, it is my belief that Angelica deserves to be pitied rather than hated. Despite Rouse's assessment of the novel as one of the poorest examples of Glasgow's fiction, he acknowledges that Angelica "rewards those who relish portraits of completely selfish, wholly evil women who may be pitiable in their evil."[33] Thiebaux also notes that Glasgow's portrayal of the tyrannical invalid in general is sympathetic, and argues that it actually constitutes an indictment of the cult of True Womanhood: "Glasgow understands how the patriarchal system harms women, either

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[32] For example, Barbro Ekman contends that she attends this social act "because of the triumph it affords her." See Ekman, *The End of a Legend: Ellen Glasgow's History of Southern Women* (Stockholm: Uppsala, 1979) 96.

[33] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 85.

making them suffer or so morally distorting them that they maltreat others."[34] Paradoxically, the artificial role of 'angel' that allows her to deceive those around her (ironically turning her into a monster) requires a complete loss of self and reveals her disempowerment as an autonomous human being.

Angelica's emptiness anticipates characters like that of the shallow and materialistic Stanley Timberlake in Glasgow's 1941 novel *In This Our Life* (1941), discussed in the last chapter of this dissertation. Like Stanley's, Angelica's power to manipulate men (and women) resides in her internalisation of the prototype of the helpless invalid. Therefore, as Matthews contends, it is "limited to the confines of the very patriarchal standard that defines it as a power in the first place."[35] Caroline resents the fact that "the whole world shared in the conspiracy to protect Angelica from the consequences of her own acts." (*TB*, 359) Her beauty and frailty have always spared her of all responsibility or any sense of duty, but it is worth noting that they have also arrested her development into adult womanhood. Therefore, she remains a spoilt child who always gets what she wants, without any sense of remorse — and no hope for autonomy whatsoever.[36]

Her inability to attain maturity manifests itself in her purposeless endeavour to vilify her husband and her obsessive preoccupation with money and status. For example, David's sister Mary Blackburn is engaged to the affable and attractive (though quite shallow) Alan Wythe, who becomes one of the wealthiest men in America upon receiving an inheritance

[34] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 7.

[35] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 92.

[36] Ornella Moscucci points at the Victorian medical belief that informs this view: "through images of physical delicacy and psychological instability, gynaecologists equated woman to the child and made her social dependence explicit. Women were irresponsible creatures in need of protection and guardianship; like children, they were incomplete adults." See Moscucci, *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 102.

from an uncle in Chicago. When Angelica learns that Mary's marriage will grant her a superior economic position, she draws on her charm and her lovely helplessness in order to win Mary's fiancé. Earlier in the novel, Caroline had already noticed that Angelica uses her shallowness to flatter men, which highlights her selflessness and her entrapment in conventional femininity. Similarly, Blackburn recognises that his wife's "greatest victories had always been achieved through her dumbness." (*TB*, 292) In conversation with a man, she has the habit "of ending every sentence with a question." (*TB*, 49) In contrast to Mary's earnest judgement and intelligent criticism of Alan's plays, Angelica's consistent praise of his genius does not threaten his masculine pride. Mary is ultimately forced to break her engagement to Alan, facing the evidence of his infatuation with Angelica. While she realises about his unworthiness and his adherence to conventions, she significantly refuses to compete with Angelica for his attention. As she confides her brother,

> Do you suppose I am the kind of woman to talk of a man's being 'taken away', as if he were a loaf of bread to be handed from one woman to another? If he had ever been what I believed him, do you imagine that any one could have 'taken' him? Is there any man on earth who could have taken me from Alan? (*TB*, 261)

Glasgow's apt comparison of Alan with bread is, to my mind, a reminder of Angelica's dependence on men for mere survival, while Mary had (innocently) viewed Alan as a potential companion.

At the same time, Blackburn is going through financial difficulties, and when he asks Angelica to cut down on expenses, she suggests dismissing Caroline, although Letty is happier and healthier than ever before. She mentions this in front of Alan, so when Blackburn strongly objects to it, she makes Alan believe that her husband's attitude betrays hidden feelings for the nurse. She is of course conscious of the fact that she cannot get a

divorce from David and marry Alan without a consistent reason, so she accuses him of having an affair with Caroline and physically abusing her. The rumours of violence and adultery ruin David's political aspirations and allow Angelica to leave him without any damage to her reputation.

Simultaneously, noticing David's high opinion of Caroline, she indirectly tells him that her detestable brother Roane is courting Caroline in order to discredit her. Angelica's manipulation of Caroline attests to her complete internalisation of patriarchal definitions of femininity and her inability to realise about the potential rewards that Caroline's friendship could have offered. After Angelica's final betrayal and Caroline's departure from Briarlay, she wonders how Angelica could "sacrifice me like this . . . destroy me though I've never harmed her." (*TB*, 303) She obsessively keeps asking herself: "*Why should she have done it?* . . . I would have worked my fingers to the bone for her . . . It would have been so easy for her to have kept my love and admiration." (*TB*, 299; emphasis in original) Behind the lovely masquerade of frailty she has embodied to perfection, Angelica is completely devoid of self, "only a negation." (*TB*, 260) As Caroline realises, her beauty is merely a "faultless ivory mask" (*TB*, 126) beneath which there is nothing, a mask "that hides everything — even vacancy." (*TB*, 152)

At the same time that she begins to unveil Angelica's malice, Caroline also becomes conscious that David Blackburn is not the brutal and abusive husband that everyone believes him to be, obviously because of his wife's defamation. She begins to appreciate his qualities and admire his efforts as a businessman and a politician. Rather than regarding him as a potential lover, Caroline associates Blackburn with her benevolent, intellectual and

encouraging father.[37] She sees in him the same "vein of iron that you can't break, you can't even bend" (*TB*, 169) that Glasgow believed she had inherited from her own father, and with which she would endow her most famous characters. In view of the nature of their relationship, Raper contends that Caroline "responds to his intellectual dominance, in association with his immense wealth, power, and energy. Within her he creates a sense of peace and order." He goes on to argue that Glasgow's portrait of the Blackburn couple contains "a political allegory . . . with Angelica standing for the feminine, self-pitying traditions of Virginia . . . and David for a new, more energetic, and intelligent male leadership."[38]

Glasgow might have shared Blackburn's political stance, and this character clearly stands for Anderson's (and most probably Glasgow's) desire for progress in a stagnating South. However, I am reluctant to accept that Glasgow meant to establish such a dichotomy, since it is based precisely in the traditional principles she always condemned. Much as she objected to the South's nostalgic clinging to the past, and given Glasgow's views on women's suffrage and established notions of femininity, I would imagine that she identified progress with something other than "energetic and intelligent male leadership." Besides, some of Blackburn's ideas reveal a racial prejudice that does not seem to agree with Glasgow's views.[39] For example, he understands the Southern reluctance to vote Republican, since the party is composed mainly by "alien white men or by Negroes":

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[37] For instances of this association in the novel see, for example, *TB*, 61-62, 196, 243.
[38] Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, 39.

[39] For a full account of Blackburn's views about granting civil rights to black Americans, please see chapter VIII in the novel, especially pages 116 and 117.

> there are wrongs worse than death, and one of these is to subject a free independent people to the rule of a servile race; to force women and children to seek protection from magistrates who had once been their slaves. (*TB*, 117)

If Blackburn is to be identified with Anderson, Glasgow's view of both is much less than idealised, as I will presently argue. Commenting on the creation of David Blackburn, Julius Rowan Raper contends that middle age brought Glasgow the realisation that "a life devoted to struggle, work, and financial independence ha robbed her of her youth, of romance, of adventure — of life itself." At the end of *Life and Gabriella* (1916), the also middle-aged protagonist Gabriella Carr finally forms a romantic attachment to the strong and worthy Ben O'Hara. Raper consequently infers that Caroline Meade's attachment to David Blackburn mirrors Glasgow's relationship with Anderson, arguing that "she had tried to salvage the forgotten side of herself by embracing a new life, by falling in love again with all the fervor of an adolescent."[40] To my mind, the portrayal of male characters actually denies that assumption and instead demonstrates Glasgow's scepticism towards the apparent self-realisation that heterosexual relationships bring.

Angelica's alcoholic and abusive brother Roane Fitzhugh is an example of moral degeneration that serves Glasgow to denounce another male assumption on conventional femininity. While it must be assumed that males cannot help their weak nature, women are expected to be passionless paragons of virtue, since they are responsible for uplifting men spiritually. Fitzhugh calls Caroline "the angel in the house" (*TB*, 136) and idealises her as "a marble Diana." (*TB*, 140) Far from regarding his own sister as an angel like everyone else (he knows her only too well), Roane recognises in Caroline "the beauty of spirit, not of flesh"

[40] Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, 37.

and sees her "as remote and royal as a goddess." (*TB*, 140) Simultaneously, his admiration of Caroline as a morally superior and (it is assumed) sexless angel does not hinder him from making her the object of his physical desires. At one point in the novel, he tells Letty that he wishes "I could trade my luck for yours" (*TB*, 136) and teasingly asks his niece to lend Caroline to him. Although Caroline obviously finds him repulsive, he entreats her to accept him on the grounds that her purity can "make me the kind of man you like . . . You could do anything with me if you cared — you are so good . . . Honestly you could make a man out of me." (*TB*, 200-201) Caroline's ironic answer to his bullying seems to come straight from Glasgow's lips: "I don't doubt that there are a number of good women who would undertake your regeneration, but I like my work better." (*TB*, 200)

Pamela Matthews interestingly argues that while David Blackburn reproduces Anderson's political ideas, Roane Fitzhugh represents another side of Glasgow's troubled relationship with him. As she quotes from various sources, Anderson's letters to Glasgow consistently praise her higher spiritual dimension as opposed to his more material qualities. His idealisation of Glasgow in their correspondence, which Matthews describes as "Glasgow's role as Beatrice to his Dante",[41] reveals his conventional views on gender and his expectations about Glasgow's role in his life. As Matthews contends,

> the view of Glasgow as excessively demanding bespeaks an attitude that Glasgow's critics have shared with Anderson: women exist to support men's more important endeavors, often reminding them of their potential spiritual heights, and they exist to gratify men's sexual desires at the same time. [42]

[41] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 93.
[42] Ibid., 95.

Though Caroline despises men's chivalric consideration towards Angelica and considers that her husband "is the only man who looks at her as if she were a human being, not an angel" (*TB*, 152), I believe Blackburn is not altogether free from patriarchal assumptions on women. He has certainly unmasked the illusion of his wife's loveliness after blindly worshipping "the sacred myth of her virtue" (*TB*, 259) during their first years of marriage. However, his idealised perception of Caroline betrays the same principle that drove him to marry Angelica, and which brings him close to Roane Fitzhugh's notion of her:

> more than ever it seemed to him the face of a strong and fervent spirit rather than the face of a woman . . . the impression she gave him was one of magical loveliness. There was, he thought, a touch of the divine in her smile, as if her look drew its radiance from an inexhaustible source.
> (*TB*, 273)

I would therefore argue that the ambiguous treatment of Blackburn and Fitzhugh and, above all, the novel's ending, precisely reasserts Glasgow's conviction that her professional life, her hard-won independence, and her network of female connections provided a more fulfilling alternative to romance. Thus, the depiction of both male and female characters seems to voice Glasgow's realisation that Anderson's view of women within marriage, as either spiritual guides or sexual partners, would inevitably bring about a debilitated and inferiorised position. As Matthews asserts,

> feeling the pull of her relationship with Anderson and at the same time sensing that marriage was not for her, and simultaneously envisioning a life of independence and female companionship with Bennett for domestic and professional support, Glasgow's own text conclusion was equally uncertain.[43]

[43] Ibid., 96.

Realising that his political ideas cannot be put in practice in Virginia, David leaves to join the army in France. His decision to fight in the war precisely when Angelica has abandoned him and he is free to love Caroline can be read as an affirmation of his ideals and his sense of duty towards his country. However, Blackburn's resolution has clear parallels with Anderson's proposal of marriage to Glasgow precisely on the eve of his departure to Romania. Therefore, it is not unlikely that Glasgow was ironically hinting that Blackburn's (and Anderson's?) heroism provides a convenient distance from an intelligent and self-assertive woman who is potentially more threatening than bullets and grenades.

While David returns from Europe, Alan Wythe is killed in the war, so Angelica pretends to be missing Letty in order to inspire David's pity and go back to Briarlay. She is now really ill and has been through a very serious operation: apparently, there is "no hope of any permanent cure" and the best she can expect is to "linger on, as an invalid, for a good many years." (*TB*, 363) Glasgow's portrayal of Angelica's condition as an in(-)valid is bitterly ironic, since it emphasises her powerlessness and her complete dependence on men, which Glasgow contrasts with Caroline's energy and active life. Angelica's illness, Glasgow seems to suggest, is indicative of the *dis*-ease that conventional femininity inevitably causes its adherents.

The novel ends with Caroline's departure to France to service as a nurse, and a dubious (and indeed questionable) future reconciliation between David and Angelica for the sake of their daughter's well being. Thiebaux posits that David and Caroline "love each other but renounce their happiness", and reads the novel's conclusion as an affirmation of David's integrity, Caroline's responsibility, and more generally as a metaphor of the sacrifices that

war demands.[44] Similarly, Linda Wagner asserts that "Caroline is herself a creature of sacrifice as much as was Virginia Pendleton" and views Caroline as frustrated:

> Blackburn renounces his only chance of happiness in giving up Caroline; Caroline, conveniently and predictably, understands. She knows he believes in his ideals and cannot see past them; she trusts his superior intellect. As a result she faces her lonely life — as poor as it is isolated — with equanimity.[45]

Glasgow's unsuccessful relationship with Anderson predictably involved a great deal of tears and sleepless nights, which may be partially reflected in the novel's ending. Probably like Glasgow herself, Caroline learns the painful lesson that past disappointments in love do not render one immune to future suffering: "what she had suffered yesterday had only taught her how to suffer more intensely today." (*TB*, 318) However, as she reflects in one of the last chapters of the novel, significantly entitled 'The Light on the Road', it is not "the unfulfilment of love, but the doubt of its reality, that had poisoned her thoughts." (*TB*, 339) Despite the sense of failure that the end of Glasgow's engagement might have initially entailed, I would argue that *The Builders* attests to her conviction that marriage would have been debilitating to both her professional career and her personal life. It is my belief that both author and character face the future with a mixture of fortitude and hope, since a sense of self-worth and a meaningful profession can prove equally (if not more) fulfilling: "'my life is my own, and I can make of it anything that I choose' . . . Whatever it might bring, she knew that she could face it with serenity — that she was not afraid of life, that she would live it in the whole, not in the part." (*TB*, 311, 377)

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[44] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 73.
[45] Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 66.

Despite its apparently gloomy ending, I believe *The Builders*, as its name suggests, provides the stepping-stone on which Glasgow would build her philosophy of life, and which she would fully develop in her 1925 novel, *Barren Ground*. In fact, Caroline's appearance and personality anticipates Dorinda's: her beauty is that of "a woman, not a girl, and her charm was the charm not of ignorance, but of intelligence, wisdom and energy." (*TB*, 44) Similarly, her strength and endurance are contrasted with the female characters that surround her, a pattern she would again use for the characterisation of Dorinda Oakley, as the next section will explain in more detail.

Ekman notes that "because of [the] ambiguity in Glasgow's portrayal of her victimizers, we cannot be altogether certain of how she regarded them."[46] The selfish/selfless invalidism of Angelica, as well as the invalidated position of the poor dependent relative Matty Timberlake and the coloured servant Mammy Riah, present images of womanhood that Glasgow would portray again and again in her novels. The various female acquaintances in Angelica's circle, who occupy their lives gossiping and organising tableaux, tea parties and endless committees with the pretence of doing charity work, only increase the sense of helplessness and futility that pervades these women's lives. They all provide different versions of conventional femininity that Glasgow clearly rejects, but with which she nevertheless sympathises. As Thiebaux aptly remarks, "both her major and her minor novels offer a rewarding discourse on the conditions, choices, and neuroses of women as she saw them and contain copious indictments of the patriarchal social controls as well."[47]

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[46] Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, 97.

[47] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 9.

If we are to identify Blackburn with Anderson, it is unlikely that Glasgow saw her life without him as bleak and frustrated. Given the evidence that this novel and her subsequent works of fiction seem to provide, I doubt that she felt frustrated or ever regretted not having married him. As the author herself stated, "I have had a[s] much love and more romance than most women, and I have not had to storke [stroke] some man the right way to win my bread or the wrong way to win my freedom."[48] To my mind, Angelica's and Blackburn's entrapment within the mechanisms of patriarchy and Caroline's escape from its incapacitating effects constitute a powerful message which is unfortunately obscured under the novel's political discourse. Caroline's humorous remark about Blackburn's ill reputation at the beginning of the novel seems to be an ironical anticipation of its conclusion. Reproducing the political tone that permeates the plot, we could say that Caroline's statement constitutes Glasgow's own declaration of independence: "as for Bluebeard — well, he can't kill me. I don't happen to be his wife." (*TB*, 12)

[48] Ibid., 23. Thiebaux quotes this passage from a folder containing various manuscripts, which Glasgow had entitled "miscellaneous pungencies." Ellen Glasgow Papers, #5060, Manuscripts Department, University of Virginia Library.

5.5. The New Woman: *Barren Ground* (1925).

Summary of the Novel Discussed in this Section:

❑ *Barren Ground* (1925)

Celebrated by most critics as Glasgow's best novel, *Barren Ground* covers thirty years in the life of Dorinda Oakley, starting when she is a girl of twenty. Bored with the numbing atmosphere in the small community of Pedlar's Mill, Dorinda longs for anything that might bring a change to her monotonous existence. Adventure and romance are materialised in the attractive figure of Jason Greylock, who has returned from his medical practice in New York to assist his dying father. A few days before their wedding, and just after Dorinda learns she is pregnant, she discovers that Jason has married Geneva Ellgood. After Jason's betrayal, Dorinda decides to leave Pedlar's Mill to look for a job in New York. Jason relinquishes his professional aspirations in New York, and surrendering to his father's wishes, stays in Pedlar's Mill. On her father's death, Dorinda inherits the family farm and works hard to transform it into a successful dairy farm. She eventually buys the Greylock property and agrees to nurse a dispossessed and alcoholic Jason, who finally dies of tuberculosis.

* * *

'Oh, if the women who wanted love could only know the infinite relief of having love over!'
*(*BG, *238)*

As Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen contend in *Ageing & Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity*, according to psychologists in the first decades of the twentieth century, middle age was inevitably associated with physical as well as mental decline. Its advent certainly posed a conflict to writers and artists, for they feared age would entail a loss in their creative powers. As Wyatt-Brown notes in her introduction

to the book, some of the best-known novels from the turn of the century up to the 1930s include middle-aged characters who "appear and simultaneously decay . . . T.S. Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night* (1934) . . . and Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited* (1944) . . . supported the tendency to think of aging-into-the-midlife as a traverse to loss, disaster, or possibly death."[49]

Reaching middle age was an even harder experience for turn-of-century women writers. In addition to this apparent decrease in creativity, women were socialised into fearing midlife and menopause, since to them it signified the loss of youth and beauty. The Victorian cult of True Womanhood, which, as has been mentioned in previous chapters, continued long after the Victorian period, valued beauty as one of the best qualities in a woman. The True Woman — and, specifically for the purposes that concern us here, the womanly woman — was thought of as a beautiful, passive, and merely decorative *objet d'art*,[50] born to love and be loved. Middle age and menopause caused great anxiety to women, as they feared to lose their status once youth and beauty were gone. The cult of Ideal Motherhood only increased this anxiety, since many women indoctrinated in those standards felt their lives to be meaningless and empty of purpose after they had lost their capacity to conceive. Menopausal women were treated with mockery — if not with utter contempt and disgust — by physicians; middle-aged women who used make-up, dressed fashionably, or engaged in activities beyond the

[49] Anne M. Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen, eds., *Aging & Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993) 27.
[50] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 40.

domestic sphere were ridiculed in medicine and conduct books of the period. Sexual desire, considered to be absent from any proper lady's nature, was considered not only abnormal but almost monstrous in menopausal women.[51]

Despite the prevailing philosophy of her period, at the time Ellen Glasgow wrote *Barren Ground*, as she recalls in her autobiography, "my imagination was more vital and urgent than it had ever been . . . I felt younger at sixty than I had felt at twenty." (*WW*, 270-272) In *Barren Ground*, Glasgow drew on much of her own experience of midlife. Already in her fifties and after the failure of her long engagement to Henry Anderson, the author reasserted her opposition to marriage, an institution she had always regarded with suspicion. Through her protagonist Dorinda Oakley, as Blair Rouse among other critics observes, Glasgow fictionalised her formula for a fulfilling life when romance is left out of the equation:

> Out of her own sorrow, anger, resentment, despair, rationalization, and hope for something better, she created the pattern of Dorinda Oakley's life. Out of her love of beauty and her faith in the fortitude which she believed sustained her, Ellen Glasgow drew the sources of Dorinda's survival, if not her triumph. [52]

Any reader acquainted with *Barren Ground* will perhaps be perplexed at the fact that its protagonist is discussed in a dissertation dealing with the female invalid, since Dorinda is to my mind the strongest and most powerful character Glasgow ever created during her entire literary life. Dorinda's unfailing strength makes her capable of

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[51] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Puberty to Menopause: The Cycle of Femininity in Nineteenth-Century America" in
Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985) 182-197. In this chapter, Smith-Rosenberg offers a detailed account of male assumptions about menopausal women in Victorian England and America.

[52] Blair Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962) 86.

overcoming some of the most difficult situations a woman could encounter at the time: she is made pregnant and then deserted by her lover, and she faces the responsibility of a ruined farm on her father's death. Were she not so brave and determined, Dorinda would most probably be condemned to a helpless and unproductive existence: invisible, mentally paralysed and utterly miserable. Against all odds, she triumphs over the social and cultural strictures that might have turned her into one of Glasgow's fallen women or parasitic spinsters.

Symptomatically, Dorinda's world is haunted by invalidism: almost all the female characters that surround the protagonist become invalids, suffer from mental disorders or even commit suicide. The novel is crucial for my analysis of Glasgow's peculiar relationship with invalidism because Dorinda seems to embody all the wisdom, optimism and self-reliance that Glasgow felt at the period she wrote the novel. Through its protagonist and the minor characters that project mirror images of her personality, the text illustrates the negative circumstances and the suffocating atmosphere that had pervaded the author's life, as well as her success in escaping the traditional roles she had been allotted.

Barren Ground covers thirty years in the life of Dorinda Oakley, starting when she is a girl of twenty. Bored with the numbing atmosphere in the small community of Pedlar's Mill, Virginia, Dorinda is eager for adventure and romance. Above all, she longs for anything that might bring a change to her monotonous existence. Change, adventure and romance are fused and materialised in the attractive figure of Jason Greylock, the son of the old local doctor, who has returned from his medical practice in New York to assist

his dying father. Soon before Dorinda and Jason are to be married, and just after Dorinda learns she is pregnant, old Dr. Greylock tells her that Jason has married Geneva Ellgood. After Jason's betrayal, Dorinda decides to leave Pedlar's Mill and look for a job in New York.

The Ellgoods are one of the few 'good families'[53] in Pedlar's Mill who have succeeded in making large profits out of their lands by applying new agricultural methods, transforming the exhausted soil into a productive dairy farm. Jason had been flirting with Geneva in New York the previous year, although no formal attachment had been formed. Through lies and deceit, she persuades her brothers to coerce Jason into marriage, and his moral weakness renders him unable to oppose the Ellgoods. In turn, he lacks the stamina to confront his father, who wants him to stay in Pedlar's Mill as the local practitioner, and abandons his ambition of going back to New York. The Greylocks, as Blair Rouse defines them, "are decadent aristocrats who exhibit the weakness of their class."[54] Old Dr. Greylock has succumbed to alcoholism and moral collapse: as Rouse notices, the scenes at Five Oaks, where a brood of mulatto children roam among dirt and decay, can be compared to Faulkner's portraits of human degradation. Dr. Greylock is obviously the father of all these children, the product of his relationship with a coloured servant who seems to exert a strange power over him. There is a traditional association between immorality and mulatto children in Southern

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[53] *CM*, 157. Glasgow explains how Dorinda's family belongs to a class of poor farmers who nevertheless were landowners, "a social unit which, though it has been consistently ignored alike by Southern literature and tradition, has borne a liberal part in the making of Southern history." Note 17 in the chapter devoted to *The Miller of Old Church* has already mentioned the distinction between 'good people' and 'good families' when referring to the families appearing in the novel, the humble Revercombs and the more aristocratic Gays.
[54] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 88.

households, since their presence is a painful reminder to plantation wives of their husbands' sexual abuse of female slaves. Rather than implying that Glasgow's disgust lies in miscenegation, my impression is that she uses these images to emphasise Greylock's monstrosity in fathering these children only to abandon them to poverty and starvation.

Jason, who does not have the strength to oppose his father, relinquishes his professional aspirations to surrender to his father's wishes and stays in Pedlar's Mill. Similarly, he surrenders to the pressure of the Ellgood men and agrees to marry Geneva, exhibiting the Greylock weakness and starting a path that dooms him to emulate his father's pathetic career. More than twenty years after marrying Geneva and having substituted his father as the local doctor, Jason's lack of determination at that point proves crucial, since his energy and enthusiasm has been sapped by his literal entrapment in the domestic. The conversation between Dorinda and Nathan is illustrative of Jason's decline:

> 'Why didn't he ever go away after his father died?'
> 'He'd lost the wish, I reckon . . . The old man hung on to him until all the sap was drained dry.'
> 'His father died years ago.'
> 'It must be going on nine years or so . . . Well, I reckon he'd used up all his energy in wishing to get away. When the chance came, he didn't have enough spirit left to take advantage of it.' (*BG*, 281-282)

The novel is divided into three parts, which Glasgow symbolically relates to the natural world. Broomsedge, pine, and life-everlasting, as Thiebaux observes, "refer to the flora of the soul, those she manages to root out and those she will nurture. Her conquest of the

land is symbolic of her energetic control of her biological and passional nature."[55] Her period of poverty and invalidism in New York ends in a (very convenient) miscarriage, although the author makes it clear that it is accidental (she faints and falls down) and not provoked. Dorinda's interrupted pregnancy probably responded to Glasgow's attempt to emphasise Jason's betrayal, since Dorinda's experience would have certainly been very different if the author had intended her to become a single mother.[56] Dr. Faraday, the New York doctor who operates on her, notices Dorinda's worth and employs her as an assistant to himself and his wife. It is Mrs. Faraday who lends her money to start her project of agricultural reform at Old Farm. After working efficiently for Dr. Faraday for two years, she comes back to Pedlar's Mill.

Returning home on her father's death, Dorinda claims her right to inherit Old Farm, the land that belonged to her mother and in which her father had hopelessly toiled against the all-consuming broomsedge. She dresses in overalls for a whole decade and works hard to transform the barren ground her father left into a successful dairy farm. Only when she has conquered the (agri)cultural forces that would have condemned her to a life of poverty and parasitic spinsterhood, she buys a new dress and resumes her old habit of attending church on Sundays. Not until she is economically affluent and socially respected does she come back to the community that, as a pregnant and penniless woman, would have rejected her ten years before. Just as she manages to overcome the social and sexual prejudices that pervaded traditional farming methods in

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[55] Marcelle Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982) 124.

[56] *Beyond Defeat* (1966), the sequel to Glasgow's 1941 novel *In This Our Life*, features a strong female protagonist like Dorinda who finally succeeds in combining single motherhood and a fulfilling life.

Pedlar's Mill, she triumphs over a failure in love that would have doomed her. As one of the fallen women Glasgow delights in portraying, Wagner observes, Dorinda "should seek either forgiveness or vengeance", but fortunately "she does neither."[57]

Instead of assuming her appointed role as a dependent female, Dorinda takes advantage of the possibilities that independence and hard work can offer. Although she is considered 'unnatural' because of her rejection of marriage and her exclusive dedication to work, she is actually exposing the evils of a culture that imposes its standards of femininity (and masculinity) by disguising them as natural. As Matthews notes, "Dorinda lives to change what *masquerades* as 'nature' according to that era's own cultural imperatives . . . Just as no 'modern methods of farming' nurtured the land, no modern attitudes provided the fertile imaginative soil necessary to nurture the New Woman of Pedlar's Mill."[58] She subverts traditional agricultural methods to her advantage, thereby unmasking the standards of 'feminine nature' as well. After a conversation with Bob Ellgood, she notices that relationships between men and women are not based on mutual understanding but entirely on men's assumptions and expectations about women. Her success makes Ellgood admire her "just as if she had been a man," and this respect is based not on her personality but on his impressions about her. Men, as she realises, do not admire a woman by what she is but by what they think she is: "Men are all like that, I suppose. They don't know you. They don't even wish to know you. They are interested in nothing on earth but their own reactions." (*BG,* 225)

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[57] Linda W. Wagner, *Ellen Glasgow: Beyond Convention* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982) 74.
[58] Pamela Matthews, *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Traditions* (Charlottesville and London: the University Press of Virginia, 1994) 157-158.

Dorinda's recurring nightmare, in which she desperately tries to plough under thistles with Jason's face, anticipates her success: "Jason plowed under becomes a metaphor for using patriarchal structures in order to subvert them, a gesture Glasgow often repeats. Barren ground has become fertile soil."[59] By refusing to define her experience through Jason's betrayal and by resisting her father's ineffectual farming methods, Dorinda, like Glasgow, envisions a fulfilling and rewarding life without romance:

> Through her heroine's defeat of the crippling forces that surround her [poverty, wasted soil, pregnancy and miscarriage, a failed love story] Glasgow also expressed her liberation from the conventional marriage plot. Neither Dorinda in the novel nor Glasgow herself in real life surrendered to the assumption that a woman is not complete without the traditional heterosexual union. [60]

Thus Glasgow created Dorinda as a fictional alter ego in order to publicise her recently discovered philosophy of life to the world and to herself. As she explains in *A Certain Measure*, Dorinda is as much part of herself and her native Virginia as she is universal. Like the author herself, "[s]he exists wherever a human being has learned to live without joy, wherever the spirit of fortitude has triumphed over the sense of futility." (*CM*, 154) Glasgow had to live through terrible experiences in life – mainly the loss of many beloved relatives – as well as several disappointments in love. Together with her increasing deafness and other serious health problems, these experiences seemed to foster at first a sense of resigned endurance of pain, and afterwards a feeling of success and self-confidence at her realisation that she had been capable of overcoming those

[59] Ibid., 164.
[60] Ibid., 152.

crises. To my mind, this double sense of loss and success is mirrored by Dorinda, who suffers a betrayal in love and learns to live without romance, finally finding the path towards fulfilment through a meaningful occupation and an alternative network of affectionate relationships:

> Repose, dignity, independence, these were the attributes with which she faced middle age, for the lines in her face were marks of character, not of emotion . . . Her happiness was independent, she felt, of the admiration of men, and her value as a human being was founded upon a durable if an intangible, basis. Since she had proved that she could farm as well as a man, there was less need for her to endeavour to fascinate as a woman. (*BG*, 299)

Dorinda is as strong-willed, self-confident and enduring as Glasgow felt she was at that period in her life. She transmits the same serenity of having achieved success and fulfilment in life, and possesses the same 'vein of iron' the author believed she had inherited from her stern Scotch-Irish ancestors and which had helped her to overcome the many tragedies of her life. As Matthews argues,

> Glasgow, in the Virginia Edition Preface (1938) to *Barren Ground*, fuses her personality with her character's, seeing herself and Dorinda as almost the same person . . . Author and character fuse as Glasgow acknowledges that their voices and "behaviour" were the same; "I was aware, through some sympathetic insight, of what she would say or do in any circumstances" [61]

To my mind, however, such a splendid and robust woman as Dorinda only provided a partial portrait of its creator. Besides her ambivalent feelings towards Henry Anderson, her health problems unfortunately affected her personal and professional life to a great extent. Although her first heart attack did not occur until December 1939,[62]

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[61] Ibid., 155.
[62] According to the chronology provided by Marcelle Thiebaux in *Ellen Glasgow,* xi.

her frequent migraine headaches, her nervous breakdowns, and her increasing loss of hearing forced her to postpone trips and visits to her friends on several occasions, and even prevented her from writing at times, as her letters evidence.[63] As Julius Rowan Raper also notes, Glasgow offered different and often contradictory views of herself in her writings:

> To the public she frequently presented herself in a rather grand fashion presiding over literary and social gatherings as the great lady of southern letters . . . This is also the Glasgow who, in the prefaces to her novels, put herself forth in an imposing manner as a master of the art of fiction. But when she turned to her autobiography, it was her identification with her mother as a helpless victim of the malevolent force of life that she allowed to govern her self-representation. If we take the two works together (along with the implied author created by all her writing), we come up with a far truer image of Ellen Glasgow that [*sic*] we find in either *A Certain Measure* or *The Woman Within*. For she was neither as helpless as the figure in the autobiography nor as grandiose as the mask created in the prefaces.[64]

In my view, the inherent contradictions in the author are again filtered into the female characters in the novel. Contrasting with Dorinda's overpowering strength, which pervades the novel, Glasgow surrounds her with powerless female characters (and even a male character) who eventually become invalids and die. These minor characters express other aspects of Dorinda's personality, perhaps as mirror images that would project the sense of otherness in the author herself, as well as the sense of triumph she experienced at having found a way towards personal and professional fulfilment despite being surrounded by negative forces.

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[63] *LL*, 77, 98, 130. See, for example, letter of Ellen Glasgow to her brother Arthur Graham Glasgow (May 23rd, 1925), letter to Carl Van Vechten (September 19th, 1929), and letter to Stark Young (March 11th, 1933).
[64] Julius Rowan Raper, '*Barren Ground* and the Transition to Southern Modernism', in *Ellen Glasgow: New Perspectives*, Dorothy M. Scura, ed. (Knoxville: the University of Tennessee Press, 1995) 149-150.

Blair Rouse defines Eudora Oakley, Dorinda's mother, as "another of Ellen Glasgow's women who are sustained yet tormented by religion."[65] The daughter of a missionary, John Calvin Abernethy, Eudora had had aspirations of becoming a missionary herself, although her missionary lover died before they could get married and leave for Africa. After she has married Joshua Oakley just because his face reminded her of John the Baptist, her unhappy marriage and her frustrated ambitions are channelled into neurotic nightmares of black babies thrown to crocodiles, sleepwalking and suicide attempts. As Susan Goodman suggests,

> Glasgow sees the domestic ideal, with its emphasis on religion, as one of women's ancient antagonists. She does, however, have some sympathy for Mrs. Oakley's mania because it allows her to survive. Glasgow connects "this dark and secret river of her dream", flowing "silently beneath the commonplace crust of experience" [*BG* 121] with creativity . . . Mrs Oakley's recurrent bouts of madness, which emanate from her frustrated creativity seem to comment - like Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) - on the imprisoned female imagination. [66]

Having been prevented from pursuing her missionary ambitions, Mrs. Oakley embraces a martyr-like discipline of self-immolation. As a 'true' woman and fervent Christian, Eudora substitutes the missionary work she has dreamt of with working to the point of exhaustion and nervous breakdown. Perhaps in a Christian attempt to purify her body and soul from her 'devious' thoughts, the self-starvation that she imposes on

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[65] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 90.
[66] Susan Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 167.

herself reminds the reader of the anorexic loathing of the body, as her body is the only possession over which Eudora can exert some control.[67]

Mrs. Oakley draws the strength to endure poverty and unhappiness from Calvinism and hard work. The Scotch-Irish 'vein of iron' which Glasgow believed she possessed and which defines some of her best-known female characters, helps both Eudora and Dorinda to overcome their personal tragedies. Although Dorinda both rejects and pities her mother's excessive selflessness, it is from her that she inherits Old Farm and the strength to make it prosper. Glasgow's book of prefaces again evidences the parallelism between author and character. As the author explains in her autobiography, she inherited from her parents a permanent conflict of opposites (see *WW*, 16 or page 19 in this dissertation). Similarly, Dorinda's father "had taken a step above his humble station as a landless man, and had married the daughter of a Presbyterian missionary." Like Glasgow herself, Dorinda was born "of this union of opposites . . . and the inherited conflict of types had kept her in arms against life." (*CM*, 158)

As Thiebaux remarks, Eudora Oakley does not trust romance — "Love is viewed askance by the Oakleys, for in the family annals there were female relatives whom love had maddened or destroyed"[68] — but exclusively relies on her vein of iron to achieve contentment in life. Her comments leave no room for doubt: "You'll be all right

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[67] Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2002) 5. Silver notices that anorexic women, as well as hysterics, displayed a form of hyperbolic femininity that mimicked Victorian standards of ladylike behaviour. According to Silver, the anorexic woman "seeks control over her appetite, perceiving other areas of her life as out of control; disciplining her body becomes her particular arena of mastery, and she considers her capacities for self-denial and self-discipline virtuous."

[68] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow,* 117.

married, daughter, if you just make up your mind that whatever happens, you ain't going to let any man spoil your life." (*BG*, 103) However, Eudora's fortitude is destroyed after she lies to protect her younger son Rufus from justice when he is suspected of having murdered a man. Commenting on this part of the novel, Wagner posits that

> [t]he tendency of women to let their lives be shaped, damaged, and even destroyed by their husbands (fathers, sons) is so common that Mrs. Oakley does not elaborate on it. Yet one of the ironies of *Barren Ground* is that after burying her own gentle yet ineffectual husband, Mrs. Oakley *does* allow her life to be destroyed by her careless younger son, Rufus. [69]

Eudora's resilience and her strong religious convictions have enabled her to bear her frustrated dreams and all the unhappiness in her life — at the high cost of complete self-effacement. Yet, the Calvinist conscience that had helped her to live through poverty, hardship and an unhappy marriage, cannot endure the torment caused by the betrayal of her principles.

As Gilbert and Gubar would argue, Eudora seems to suffer from an "anxiety of authorship":[70] although her desires are religious or altruistic rather than artistic, her creative impulses are smothered by the suffocating environment around her. The debilitating influence she had received from her forefathers prevented her from having the necessary tools to defy patriarchal strictures and look for an alternative to her unfulfilling life. However, Dorinda manages to overcome this negative influence while

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[69] Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 72. (emphasis in original)

[70] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic,* 51. Gilbert and Gubar contend that women artists substitute the male 'anxiety of influence', based on an Oedipal struggle to invalidate their precursors, for an 'anxiety of authorship'. Since they have no female precursors to follow, they argue, "this female anxiety is profoundly debilitating. Handed down not from one woman to another but from the stern literary 'fathers' of patriarchy to all their 'inferiorised' female descendants, it is in many ways the germ of a dis-ease."

embracing the fortitude her mother possessed. She thus recovers a positive matrilineal heritage that gives her the strength to formulate the alternative option to patriarchy her mother failed to find for herself. As Julius Rowan Raper observes, Glasgow drew on many of her own feelings towards her parents in the novel:

> her deep emotions surrounding the victimization and pain her mother experienced come through, split up, in numerous scenes: the illness of Rose Emily Pedlar, the fondness of Jason's father for women of mixed blood, Geneva's madness, and, of course, Jason's rejection of Dorinda. Thus divided up and dealt with in manageable pieces, the ambivalences of Glasgow's early life relived in *Barren Ground* give the novel its remarkable emotional authority as well as [its] psychological complexity.[71]

Her portrait of old Dr. Greylock is, to my mind, a clear reminder of Francis Glasgow. Besides, by contrasting Dorinda with normative (and consequently victimised) women, the author perhaps acknowledged, like Dorinda, the strengths as well as the weaknesses she had inherited from her mother.

Together with her mother, Dorinda's friend Rose Emily Pedlar constitutes an example of selflessness and endurance that acts as a contrast to Dorinda's experience. Rose Emily is the sacrificing wife of Nathan Pedlar, the owner of the local store in which Dorinda works as a young girl. Mother of four children and a chronic invalid due to a lung disease she developed through lack of exercise and fresh air, her noble heart and her blind optimism sustain her hopes of getting up the next morning even as she lies dying. Although her age is never specified, Rose Emily is some ten or fifteen years older than Dorinda, since they become attached when Dorinda is in her late teens and starts to work at Nathan's store. When the novel starts Rose Emily has gone through four

[71] Raper, '*Barren Ground* and the Transition to Southern Modernism', 159.

pregnancies, while Dorinda has become more of a help to her invalid friend than to Nathan. Despite Dorinda's rejection of these early models of extreme self-effacement, they both provide an example of the fortitude that will ultimately lead her to success and self-realisation. As Wagner points out,

> even though she questions the sterility of the loves of her self-sacrificing mother and her dying friend, Rose Emily Pedlar, she admires these women. She reacts against their "morbid unselfishness" (*BG* 49), but she does turn to them when she wants answers to her questions about love and marriage.[72]

Rose Emily thus acts as one of Dorinda's surrogate mothers. Like Eudora — and like Glasgow's mother Anne Gholson — Rose Emily passes onto Dorinda an ambivalent heritage of both strength and helplessness. Both Eudora and Rose Emily form the core of Dorinda's network of female affiliations: for many years, she relies on these two women for support and affection, and it is to them she confides her problems and anxieties. As Mrs. Oakley and Rose Emily gradually grow weaker and die, Dorinda seeks moral and emotional support in other female allies: her early connection with the black servant Aunt Mehitable proves crucial, since she introduces Dorinda to her granddaughter Fluvanna Moody. Dorinda also finds support in male figures like those of Nathan Pedlar – she eventually becomes his wife for a short period – and his son John Abner, who becomes her confidant and heir towards the end of the novel. However, it is Fluvanna who remains Dorinda's most valued and lifelong companion.

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[72] Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 71.

Aunt Mehitable Green and her granddaughter Fluvanna Moody, the most significant black characters in the novel, complete the circle of female relationships that provide the necessary support to Dorinda's success in middle age. Aunt Mehitable, much in the fashion of Glasgow's black nurse Lizzie Jones, acts as a surrogate mother to Dorinda. By means of her skill and her powers as a "conjure woman" (*BG*, 59), she warns Dorinda about her pregnancy before she herself knows about it. Through her companionship with Fluvanna, who will work for her at Old Farm, Dorinda succeeds in establishing a long-lasting relationship that does not curtail her aspirations as a traditional marriage would have surely done. Instead, Fluvanna's friendship helps her to manage her farm more efficiently, while it provides comfort and emotional fulfilment as well:

> the best years of her youth, while her beauty resisted hard work and sun and wind, were shared only with the coloured woman with whom she lived. She had prophesied long ago that Fluvanna would be a comfort to her, and the prophecy was completely fulfilled. The affection between the two women had outgrown the slender tie of mistress and maid, and had become as strong and elastic as the bond that holds relatives together. They knew each other's daily lives; they shared the one absorbing interest in the farm; they trusted each other without discretion and without reserve. (*BG*, 270)

The contemporary reader cannot help but feel a tinge of inherited racism in Dorinda's attitude towards Fluvanna and her black employees in general. For example, she supervises every job in the process of butter making, for "if she were weak enough to compromise with the natural carelessness of the Negroes, she knew the pails and pans would not be properly scalded, and the milk would begin to lose its quality." (*BG*, 239) Although Dorinda attributes to blacks a tendency to carelessness in several instances in the text, she admits that she herself has felt this temptation as well, and that "this instinct

to slight was indigenous to the soil of the South." (*BG*, 239) On the whole, however, her friendship with Fluvanna transcends the sexist and racist ideology that pervades the South. Dorinda thus represents the necessary evolution that both women and the South must undergo to progress; both Dorinda and Glasgow supersede traditions and look for alternative options to achieve self-fulfilment in life. As Susan Goodman argues, Dorinda rejects her grandfather's paternalist racism and her mother's self-effacing Calvinism, since she has "no place in that tradition, just as Glasgow has no place in the tradition of Southern plantation novels and Southern Belles."[73] Pamela Matthews holds a similar point of view as regards the legacy of Dorinda's ancestors, her mother and Fluvanna:

> It falls to Dorinda to dream a different dream and to change the reality her mother could only escape in the bewilderment of unsatisfying marriage, nightmares and suicide attempts. Dorinda's relationship with Fluvanna realizes her mother's desire to rewrite the racism of John Calvin Abernethy's legacy. And Dorinda's dreams chart her course from her mother's helplessness to her own renewed matriarchal vision of female agency.[74]

Just as Dorinda inherits her mother's courage and strength without her self-effacement, her companionship with Fluvanna fulfils Eudora's frustrated desires to become a different kind of missionary and thus displaces her family's attitude towards the black community.

As Matthews points out, it became increasingly problematic for women novelists to express their commitment to a female community as a valid alternative to the romantic ending. *Barren Ground* stands as an exception, since Glasgow was aware of

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[73] Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 166-167.
[74] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 163.

the implications of such an alternative, and found it difficult to write freely about female companionship after 1925. In *Barren Ground*, Glasgow succeeded in creating for Dorinda (and herself) a world of female connections that constituted an escape from the conventional romance plot. According to Matthews, Glasgow's biographer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings wrote that Eudora (Dorinda's mother) was the name of Glasgow's secretary Anne Virginia Bennett's mother as well[75]: "the novel's very origin traces a matricentric genealogy that connects author, companion, and protagonist (and even biographer, if we include Rawlings)." By the time she wrote *The Sheltered Life* (1932), Glasgow was forced to adjust her narrative to post-Freudian views of female companionship that viewed it as deviant, while she strengthened and deepened her commitment to her female friends in her private life.

Geneva Ellgood portrays the reversal of these values, since she embodies Glasgow's awareness that some relationships among women can be destructive if they entail competition and jealousy.[76] From the beginning of the novel Geneva is portrayed as a conventional Belle, with a soft and delicate appearance and the sort of girlish-not-yet-womanly prettiness that characterises women of weak health. She provides a striking contrast with the protagonist that is physical (Dorinda has the beauty of a strong, capable woman) as well as psychological: while Dorinda adjusts to reality, Geneva's life is wasted by her adherence to romantic illusions. She shows her shallowness and

[75] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 153-156.
[76] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 38. As Gilbert and Gubar argue, commenting on Andersen's *Snow White*, "female bonding is extraordinarily difficult in patriarchy: women almost inevitably turn against women because the voice in the looking-glass sets them against each other."

meanness of character when she uses her 'innocence' and vulnerability to coerce Jason into marriage, even when she knows he is engaged to Dorinda. As another of Glasgow's invalids, Geneva is a victim of the Southern code of femininity who participates in her own victimisation, but who nevertheless deserves to be pitied as such.

Predictably, Geneva loses her physical charm and her mental health once she is married to Jason. Not strong enough to oppose old Dr. Greylock and unable to confront her husband's weakness, she falls prey to the moral degeneracy that pervades Five Oaks. Her disappointment in marriage and her inability to come to terms with it gradually turn into depression and increasing mental instability. After some years, she begins to roam the fields and talk to herself, telling everyone about her delusions: her hallucination consists in imagining she is pregnant and that Jason has murdered her baby. She finally commits suicide, like a lovesick Ophelia, by drowning herself. Apart from being Dorinda's antagonist, Geneva represents another of her invalid alter egos, the part of her Dorinda rejects, or the self she might have become, as Raper puts it, "had she succeeded in snaring Jason."[77] Personally, I doubt that Glasgow would have defined Dorinda's 'snaring' of Jason as a success. To my mind, Geneva's role in the novel precisely serves to emphasise the dreadful fate Dorinda has escaped.

Geneva's failure consists, Glasgow seems to comment, in constructing a self that is entirely dependent on Jason, which immediately breaks down once her fantasies about love and marriage are confronted with the bleak reality of Jason's shallowness. Her delirium reveals frustrated desires of happiness in marriage and motherhood, since she

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[77] Julius Rowan Raper, *From the Sunken Garden: The Fiction of Ellen Glasgow, 1916-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) 92.

has been denied the fulfilment she expected to find in the traditional feminine roles. In my view, Geneva's delusions also betray an unconscious sense of guilt over her participation in Jason's separation from Dorinda. Although she never knew that Dorinda became pregnant, it is symptomatic that she fantasises about dead babies. As Dorinda's uncanny double, Geneva seems to mirror Dorinda's experience in the fact that she believes Jason killed her imaginary baby, just as he indirectly caused Dorinda's real baby to die.

As Linda W. Wagner points out, "Geneva's tragedy as a woman is that she has never come to know what Dorinda understands early, that life has some value as long as she could rule her own mind."[78] One cannot help wondering whether Glasgow was reflecting on her own failed relationship with Henry Anderson, presumably discontinued because of Glasgow's doubts about marriage and her strong suspicions about his affair with Queen Marie of Rumania while he was serving the army in that country during the First World War. Some years after their engagement was broken, Glasgow might have been relieved at the thought that her marriage to Anderson might have ended in disaster.

Glasgow offers an interesting perspective of female self-realisation through Dorinda's experience of middle age. She refuses conventional marriage and spends most of her adult years as a single woman who earns success and financial independence without male help. However, Glasgow makes Dorinda go through a brief and experimental form of marriage with Nathan Pedlar. The author seems to have constructed a fantasy of an ideal marriage here, since their relationship is based on understanding and

[78] Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 76.

companionship, and does not entail any of the constraining elements of a conventional heterosexual union. Dorinda retains her financial independence and the responsibility over the management of her property, and Nathan becomes another member of her network of affiliations instead of being the cause for the disruption of this community.

Dorinda's experience of marriage and midlife is thus entirely different from that of her mother, Rose Emily or Geneva. Although her marriage to Nathan Pedlar is loveless and sexless, his companionship proves enriching and his help in the farm absolutely instrumental. It is actually through Nathan — he bids for the Greylock farm for her — that Dorinda buys Five Oaks, thus becoming one of the most important members in her community next to the Ellgoods. After a few years of married life, when Nathan heroically dies trying to save the victims of a train accident, Dorinda misses Nathan's support and friendship and gets to appreciate the value of his sensible advice. Although as a young woman she had thought that "there could be no drearier lot . . . than marriage with Nathan for a husband," (*BG*, 68) she recalls her years with Nathan and realises the truth about Rose Emily's words: "Nathan is the best man that ever lived." (*BG*, 19) Symbolically assuming her dead friend's identity as the second Mrs. Pedlar, she continues Rose Emily's unfinished task by taking care of her husband and helping to raise her children. Thus Glasgow once again portrays a female world of relationships through which women assume each other's responsibilities and create strong bonds of affection across boundaries of generation, race and social class.

Some critics and scholars question Dorinda's triumph at the end of the novel, reading Dorinda as a tragic figure who is unable to recognise her failure as a human being. For

instance, Marcelle Thiebaux points out that Dorinda reveals the author's inability to see her character's (as well as her own) impairments:

> Too involved personally in Dorinda's ascendancy to see her neuroses plainly, Glasgow is unable to maintain the necessary ironic distance to judge her. Where Dorinda is repressed and vindictive, Glasgow insists she is serenely strong. Where Dorinda is deadened, her author thinks her alive. Unwilling to come to terms fully with her heroine's impaired humanity, Glasgow believes to the end, as Dorinda herself does, in her moral superiority. [79]

After taking care of the dying Jason — now dispossessed and ill with tuberculosis — Dorinda suffers a crisis the night after his funeral. Jason's death symbolically stands for the end of her youth and her unacknowledged illusions about love: "because it was too late and her youth was gone, she felt that the only thing that made life worth living was the love that she had never known and the happiness that she had missed." (*BG*, 406) Understandably, Dorinda at times feels the weight of her past story with Jason and the passion she missed because of him, but she is capable of valuing the advantages of her chosen option upon observation of other married women in Pedlar's Mill: "[e]ven the few who had married the men they had chosen had paid for it – or so it appeared to her – with a lifetime of physical drudgery or emotional disappointment." (*BG*, 319) Although her life as a single woman has entailed a fair share of physical drudgery and emotional disappointment as well, Dorinda has gained in independence and self-realisation, while the years seem to have brought no reward to these other women.

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[79] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow,* 125.

Commenting on the ending of the novel, Julius R. Raper agrees with Thiebaux in defining Dorinda's life as tragic and wasted. Raper argues that, since Jason never realised either the extent of her hatred (he could not know she was pregnant) or the importance of her revenge, all her efforts have become futile: "revenge takes two. Hers has been wasted upon a figment of her imagination. Even now she cannot consciously acknowledge this deep failure."[80] Despite her success, Blair Rouse contends, her life continues to be shaped by Jason and the passion she could never experience because of him:

> Although Dorinda has learned to survive through fortitude and to find value in her life, she has missed the love which she values supremely; and in this realization lies in part her tragedy . . . Dorinda's life represents a loss, a waste of life . . . because she has excluded passion from her existence. [81]

However, to my mind, it is the life and death of Geneva Greylock, rather than Dorinda's failed romance, which constitutes the real tragedy in the novel. It provides the most striking substantiation to my disagreement with the idea that Dorinda's life is wasted because of a disappointment in love. I would argue that, as Dorinda's reflection, Geneva evidences the disempowerment that conventional marriage would have brought Dorinda. Just before she commits suicide, Geneva tells Dorinda about her delusion concerning the dead baby, while she (lucidly) acknowledges that stealing Jason from her was far from an intelligent move: "You never liked me because you loved Jason. Jason jilted you . . . You don't know, but there are worse things than being jilted." (*BG*, 279)

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[80] Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, 94.
[81] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 93-94.

In *Ellen Glasgow and the Woman Within*, E. Stanly Godbold reads Dorinda's character as "a mechanized human being totally drained of humanity" and defines her "philosophy of life" as being "so without feeling, so without emotion, that its adherent might just as well be dead."[82] Godbold considers that Dorinda's creation sprung partly from Glasgow's "furious desire for revenge":

> Revenge against Henry Anderson for leaving her for the Queen of Rumania and against the whole male sex for not supplying at least one from their number to be her appropriate suitor, revenge against her poor health, heredity, and environment, revenge against the merciless years she had struggled and failed to create a great novel, and revenge against the grim doctrine of predestination that often brought her to hopeless despair. [83]

Barbro Ekman agrees with Godbold's view by saying that "[i]n creating a character who had suffered tragedies similar to her own and making her triumph, she wanted to prove her own superiority." He contends that Glasgow failed in making Dorinda really triumph in the novel, since "by making her a fanatic, she proves instead that a man's betrayal does ruin a woman's life."[84] To my mind, the close connection between Dorinda's experience and Glasgow's philosophy perhaps reveals some resentment towards Henry Anderson and, to some extent, it also portrays a somehow utopian view of female success. By making Dorinda so unfailingly strong, Glasgow was

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[82] E. Stanley Godbold, *Ellen Glasgow and the Woman Within* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972) 137.
[83] Ibid., 241. Similarly, Louis Auchincloss contends that Glasgow "was unable sufficiently to pull the tapestry of fiction over her personal grievances and approbations . . . It is strange that a novelist of such cultivation and such fecundity and one who was also such a student of her craft should not have seen her own glaring faults . . . How, moreover, could she have failed to see that her own bitterness on the subject of men was reflected in her heroines to the point of warping the whole picture of their lives?" See Louis Auchincloss, *Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965) 88.
[84] Barbro Ekman, *The End of a Legend: Ellen Glasgow's History of Southern Women* (Stockholm: Uppsala, 1979) 110, 114.

perhaps fantasising about a female self that would not be hindered by emotional conflicts or haunted by weak health.

In my view, despite her crises and her nightmares, Dorinda is aware that marriage with Jason would have resulted in tragedy. Her mother's, Rose Emily's and Geneva's stories serve as a reminder of the foolishness "in attempting to weave durable happiness out of a single thread of emotion." (*BG*, 231) Her second visit to Five Oaks — now as its owner — eighteen years after she learnt the news about Jason's marriage to Geneva brings back memories of that terrible night. Upon reflection, however, Dorinda realises that while she has managed to create a meaningful life for herself, Jason has succumbed to his literal entrapment in the House of the Father: "in those eighteen years she had spent her youth and had restored dead land to life; but this house in which Jason had lived was still sunk in immovable sloth and decay." (*BG*, 308) His compliance with conventions, and his marriage to Geneva, Glasgow seems to comment, is the real barren ground in the novel. His weakness to defy traditions has destroyed his life and Geneva's, leading both of them to illness and an untimely death.

Her crisis at Jason's death, to which Raper, Rouse and Godbold refer as evidence of her failure, precisely serves to show her humanity. Her breakdown on the night after Jason's funeral is to me a natural reaction towards the man she had loved as a young woman and whom she had been nursing for several months. After all, she would indeed be "drained of humanity", as Godbold defines her, if she rejoiced in his death. Her experience of recovery and renewal the following morning illustrates Glasgow's belief in her 'vein of iron' to overcome sorrow. Similarly, her reliance on women's self-worth and female companionship seems to provide the key to a fruitful life at the close of the

novel. Although Pamela Matthews remarks on Dorinda's inability to dissociate her experience from her early involvement with Jason, she points out that Godbold's assumptions reveal traditional beliefs that understand female companionship as necessarily less fulfilling than a conventional heterosexual relationship:

> [Dorinda] still fails to realize that she has worth apart from him (and apart from the fate that he stands for), and accepts the interpretation that because she has rejected heterosexuality, her heart is frozen. . . . Glasgow exposes the real "barren ground" of the novel. It is not Dorinda in her childlessness and coldness, as some have suggested. It is not even the actual land from which Dorinda at last succeeds in wresting a prosperous living. Rather, the "barren ground" is the patriarchally controlled and transmitted figurative landscape — the ideology and the culture — against which Dorinda and other women are forced to define themselves and envision their destinies. [85]

According to her autobiography, Glasgow viewed the novel as a liberation from the constraints of the cultural mores of her day that imposed normative male-female relationships as the only means for female self-realisation. At fifty-two, she prophesied that her late middle age would be the fullest and most productive period in her life, an opinion shared by several critics.[86] As Glasgow writes,

> I was free from chains. I belonged to myself . . . After more than twenty-one years, I was at last free. If falling in love could be bliss, I discovered, presently, that falling out of love could be blissful tranquillity . . . I wrote *Barren Ground*, and immediately I knew I had found myself. (*WW*, 243-245)

Dorinda's triumph over paralysing social forces, and her striving to transform barren ground into fertile soil, does not necessarily have to be viewed as a victory over

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[85] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 164-166.

[86] Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 80. For example, Linda Wagner comments on *Barren Ground* while she reflects on the quality of the novels Glasgow wrote after 1925: "stylistically as well as thematically, there is reason to consider *Barren Ground* the beginning of Glasgow's great period." Similarly, Glasgow herself claimed that "creative energy flooded my mind, and I felt, with some infallible intuition, that my best work was ahead of me" in her autobiography. (*WW*, 243-245)

nature through artificial manipulation. To my mind, it is more related to both achieving some control over nature as well as a better understanding of its needs, the process involving also her own female nature. Through her hard work, Dorinda succeeds in returning the soil in Old Farm to its past splendour, recovering its natural beauty and fertility after years of farming methods that left it exhausted and barren. By going back to nature and literally to her mother's roots, Dorinda reinterprets women's traditions and finds an alternative to her mother's (and other women's) tragic existence. In her essay 'Gail Godwin and Ellen Glasgow: Southern Mothers and Daughters', Kathryn Lee Seidl remarks on the importance of the relationship between mothers and daughters in the works of both writers. She notes that in the novels of both Glasgow and Godwin

> the young women return to the South, to the heritage they have rejected, and to their mothers to find that within their pasts are values that console, sustain, and may even lead to contentment, creativity, and individuation . . . Both authors use mothers and grandmothers as the purveyors of family legends. These legends often help the protagonist understand an important part of herself or of her mother.[87]

Although Seidl perceives a stronger connection between mothers and daughters in Godwin's novels, one of Glasgow's main concerns both in her fiction and in her personal life was precisely to recover the heritage of her foremothers. In my opinion, this endeavour is specially made patent in *Barren Ground*: Dorinda (re)creates her own self by listening to her mother's and other women's stories of suffering, and reaches a fulfilling middle age thanks to the lessons she has learnt from them. Unlike the other women characters in the novel, Dorinda is not weakened or destroyed by the loss of her

[87] Kathryn Lee Seidl, 'Gail Godwin and Ellen Glasgow: Southern Mothers and Daughters', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 288-289.

youth but gains in knowledge, independence and power. Her beauty is moulded by time and hard work, but it is never diminished. Mimicking Glasgow's own experience, Dorinda embraces her foremothers' traditions of female support and nurturance but rejects the frustrating aspects of marriage, domesticity and motherhood that doomed her own mother. Thus Dorinda is able to revise and redefine the terms of her existence and recover a matrilineal heritage that had been hidden (but never lost) in the selfless lives of the women that had lived before her. As Gilbert and Gubar reflect when they comment on Mary Shelley's visit to the cave of the Cumaean Sybil,[88] Dorinda has re-envisioned and re-created the empowering message that her foremothers (Eudora Oakley, Rose Emily Pedlar, Anne Gholson, Sybil, Medusa, or Lilith) shared, and that lay beneath the silence of patriarchal discourse.

5.6. The End of a Legend: *The Sheltered Life* (1932).

Summary of the Novel Discussed in this Section:

- ***The Sheltered Life* (1932)**

Set in the town of Queenborough (a fictionalised version of Richmond), *The Sheltered Life* portrays the lives of the Archbalds and the Birdsongs, the two remaining good families in a now unfashionable Washington Street. The old General David Archbald shares the family household with his two daughters Etta and Isabella, his daughter-in-law Cora, and his young granddaughter Jenny Blair. Near the Archbalds lives George Birdsong, a middle-class lawyer, and his ravishingly beautiful wife Eva, the reigning belle of Queenborough society during the 1890s. Eva has been ignoring her husband's infidelities for years and struggles to live up to the ideal of Southern womanhood she embodies, whilst

[88] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 93-97.

maintaining a façade of happiness in marriage. Her gradual process towards self-awareness as she confronts a terrible illness provides the main plot in the novel.

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> *How to be beautiful, and consequently, powerful, is a question of far greater importance to the feminine mind than predestination or any other abstract subject. If women are to govern, control, manage, influence, and retain the adoration of husbands . . . they must look their prettiest at all times.*[89]

The quotation above illustrates one of the main contradictions in Southern patriarchy: since women's only power lay in their capacity to allure men, unattractive women who did not fulfil the male ideal of femininity were looked upon as superfluous and almost unnatural. Ironically, the ravishing Belles the Southern cavalier worshipped were rendered equally powerless, as conforming to this ideal requires a complete loss of self. As Glasgow states in her book of prefaces, *The Sheltered Life* (1932) sprang from an almost unconscious need to condemn the cult of the womanly woman as she had experienced it in her native Richmond: "the background is that of my girlhood, and the rudiments of the theme must have lain buried somewhere in my consciousness . . . I saw a shallow and aimless society of happiness-hunters, who lived in a perpetual flight from reality." (*CM*, 203) In this novel, Glasgow shifts her perspective again and moves back from the New Woman to the Southern lady. As late as 1932, she still felt the need to recall her past and voice the tragedy of many women whose lives had been crushed by patriarchal standards and the Southern code of evasive idealism. To my mind, Glasgow's

[89] Historian Ellen Plante quotes this piece of advice to Victorian ladies from *Polite Life and Etiquette* (1891). See Ellen M. Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America: A Social History* (New York: Facts on File, 1997) 207.

profound exploration of the victimisation of women under that principle makes *The Sheltered Life* one of her best novels. In turn, the novel provides an extremely interesting instance of the devastating effects of the cult of invalidism, and it is thus crucial as regards the main purpose of this dissertation.

After brilliantly expressing her philosophy in *Barren Ground*, Glasgow became aware that she could not portray female bonds of affection without raising hackles among her contemporaries. By the 1930s, Freud's theories were widely known in America — or rather, the popularised and over-simplistic version of them that feminism has since then attacked. As Linda Wagner-Martin notes in *Ellen Glasgow: New Perspectives*, "in Glasgow's life, as in her fiction, heterosexual romance broke into that largely matriarchal lifestyle with the suddenness, and the threat, of an assault."[90] This is especially true of *The Sheltered Life*, where Glasgow bitterly exposes the evils of the cult of the womanly woman, which disrupts female affiliation by setting the female characters against each other. She consistently shows how women's adherence to this male-defined ideal not only cripples their lives and aspirations, but also destroys the matriarchal world of companionship and support that Glasgow held so precious.

Set in the town of Queenborough (a fictionalised version of Richmond) from 1906 to the eve of the First World War, *The Sheltered Life* portrays the life of the two remaining 'good families' in Washington Street, the Archbalds and the Birdsongs, the last stalwart symbols of the old order, who struggle to ignore the quickly industrialising invasion that manifests itself in the strong chemical stench that comes from a factory nearby. Auchincloss aptly notes that the smell is not only "the modern world that threatens them from without", but also a reminder of

[90] Linda Wagner-Martin, 'Glasgow's Time in *The Sheltered Life*', in *Ellen Glasgow: New Perspectives,* Dorothy M. Scura, ed. (Knoxville: the University of Tennessee Press, 1995) 196.

the "decadence that attacks them from within."[91] Unaware of the changes around them, they cling to the dream of a past that has died, just as decaying Belles cling to their memories of past glories. As Elizabeth Myer argues,

> Just as the South failed in its bloody fight against the industrial might of the Union, so did it lose ground in attempting to preserve its time-honored manner of life – an aristocracy supported by a slave population and a poor white class, and devoted to the niceties of leisurely pursuits . . . Those so indoctrinated by tradition in the old manner of life could not change, and harked back to the past while surrounded by proof of the present. [92]

The story is told from different perspectives, and Glasgow's standpoint is not clearly connected to any of her characters. She clearly changes the structure of *Barren Ground* where the point of view of the main character, Dorinda, pervades the novel. In *The Sheltered Life*, in the author's own words, "I knew intuitively that the angle of vision must create the form, [and] I employed two points of view alone, though they were separated by the whole range of experience." (*CM*, 200) The old patriarch of the Archbald household, General David Archbald, offers the wise but unrealistic outlook of the poet he once wanted to be, still educated in the romantic glamour of plantation life. He is unable to see the wrongs these principles are causing in the four dependent women who live under his roof and protection: his two daughters Etta and Isabella, his daughter-in-law Cora, and his young granddaughter Jenny Blair. It is the latter who will provide another perspective, that of the woman of the New South who, above all, wants to live her own life, but who will fail to escape the constraints of her upbringing. Near

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[91] Louis Auchincloss, *Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965) 79.
[92] Elizabeth Gallup Myer, *The Social Situation of Women in the Novels of Ellen Glasgow* (Hicksville: Exposition Press, 1978) 17.

the Archbalds lives George Birdsong, a middle-class lawyer, and his ravishingly beautiful wife Eva, the reigning belle of Queenborough society during the 1890s. The physical and psychological changes Eva will undergo in the course of the novel will be central to explaining how the cult of genteel behaviour can affect a woman who has lived, as the man-made ideal demands, only for love and beauty. Eva's blind adherence to this ideal, instead of giving her happiness, leads her to insanity and self-destruction.

Glasgow succeeded in creating five characters who are products of that education within the sheltered life and who have been victimised by it. Isabella Archbald is one of the "fallen women" Glasgow depicts in most of her works of fiction.[93] She is not constrained by the strict code of behaviour that suffocates her sister Etta and that allows her sister-in-law Cora to be a parasite. Although engaged to silly Thomas Lunsford, she consented to drive "with a sober horse and a spirited young man, instead of safely reversing the order." (*TSL*, 16) Her virtue was not spoilt, but her reputation was severely damaged, and Thomas immediately broke off the engagement. Isabella, already past twenty-five, loses all chance of getting married and begins to be labelled an old spinster. From then on, she starts ignoring Thomas and carries little trays of food to Joseph Crocker, the worthy and attractive young man who is repairing their roof. Neither Etta nor Cora see any harm in Isabella "amusing herself" with Joseph; their prejudice is so strong that it never occurs to them that she may ignore it. Joseph is from a lower social class and, to make things worse, he does not attend the Episcopal Church. Just three days after

[93] Although she is not seduced or made pregnant, and thus she does not strictly speaking represent a 'fallen woman', her inappropriate behaviour and its consequences cause everyone to treat her as if she were.

Isabella renews her engagement to Thomas Lunsford, she takes the morning train to Washington and comes back to Queenborough as Mrs. Joseph Crocker.

The story of Etta Archbald is that of the frustrated spinster who is condemned to economic parasitism by a system that venerates beauty as the greatest blessing in a woman, and marriage as her sole aim. As Pamela Matthews notes, Etta is conscious that her unattractiveness makes her powerless and almost invisible[94]: the mysterious neuralgia that renders her a chronic invalid acts as a cultural symbol of her society's rejection of plain women as in-valid beings. Without the emotional fulfilment she has been indoctrinated to long for, the only thing Etta can do is retreat into excruciating headaches and sudden fits of hysteria.[95] She often wakes up in the middle of the night with a terrible fear she cannot name, and weeps for hours because nobody loves her. She has an obsessive admiration for Eva and resorts to a homoerotic, almost sadistic relationship with her female friends. After one of Etta's nervous crises, Jenny Blair mentions that Etta's female friends "don't last" and that "she cried all the time after Miss Margaret Wrenn broke off with her." Apparently, her friend stopped visiting her because "Etta would pinch her until she was black and blue." (*TSL*, 88) As a victim of cultural constraints, she is not different from Eva, as she considers her life wasted when she realises she is not a beautiful object for admiration.

Cora Archbald, Jenny Blair's mother, has made herself comfortable in the role of the helpless widow, never seeking economic independence after her husband's accidental death. In her cosy shelter of wealth and position, she takes care of her father-in-law in his old age. Her worries circle around preserving the honour and the pride of her (still unmarried!) sisters-in-law

[94] Pamela Matthews also mentions this issue. See Matthews, *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Traditions* (Charlottesville and London: the University Press of Virginia, 1994) 186.
[95] For an instance of Etta's nervous crises, see Chapter VIII in *The Sheltered Life*.

and preparing Jenny Blair for a proper début. She has formed her character on *Little Women*, but her daughter finds Alcott's Meg and Jo "poky old things." (*TSL*, 3) Although her aunt Etta says that Jenny Blair is far ahead of her friend Bena Peyton in intelligence, Cora retorts that "Bena has a nice plump little figure, and Jenny Blair is as straight as a pole." (*TSL*, 10)

The first part of the novel introduces the Archbald women in what I believe is Glasgow's attempt at illustrating the examples of womanhood that surround Jenny Blair's childhood. Glasgow seems to suggest that none of these women (except perhaps Isabella, and only partially) offers an image of female self-fulfilment, and only Eva provides the young Jenny Blair with the warmth of female companionship. As the novel unfolds, the Archbald women gradually fade into the background, while the character of Eva Birdsong acquires more centrality in the plot. As Wagner posits, "having few achieving women to imitate," Jenny Blair will choose Eva as her role model and will "begin the pattern that dooms her."[96]

The first part of the novel, "The Age of Make-Believe", begins when Eva Birdsong is thirty-four and still a magnificent beauty, with luxurious bronze hair, sparkling blue eyes and delicate features. Eva's breath-taking beauty has risen to the level of "allegory" and "legend", and stories are told about her goddess-like charm, which is said to have stopped processions in funerals and weddings:

> As late as the spring of 1906, she was still regarded less as a woman than as a memorable occasion. Rumours sped from door to door as she walked down the street; crowds gathered at corners or flocked breathlessly to the windows of clubs. In her middle thirties, and married for twelve years to a man who was unworthy of her, she had already passed into legend. (*TSL*, 7)

[96] Linda W. Wagner, *Ellen Glasgow: Beyond Convention* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982) 87.

As Marcelle Thiebaux says about Eva Birdsong in her biography of Ellen Glasgow, "the quality of her beauty is almost an abstract ideal to be worshipped and recounted in stories."[97] If that were not sufficient, her voice was once considered similar to that of a true soprano, and it seems she could have become a famous singer. In spite of having all the men in Queenborough at her feet, she sacrificed everything to elope with handsome George Birdsong, who could barely provide a modest roof for her. Though Eva is still very beautiful, she finds this reputation a heavy burden, because her beauty will inevitably be affected by time. In one of the first chapters of the novel, Eva is walking down Washington Street while the Archbald women are observing her admiringly, although she thinks no one sees her. She has disciplined herself to look perfect at all times, but there are moments when her mask relaxes:

> Thinking herself alone in the street, unaware of the row of admiring spectators, Mrs. Birdsong had permitted her well-trained muscles to relax for a moment, while her brilliance suddenly flickered out, as if the sunshine had faded. The corners of her mouth twitched and drooped; her step lost its springiness. (*TSL*, 21)

As Linda Wagner aptly describes her, "Eva is beauty, womanliness, perfection — but such an embodiment of ideals can only be unnatural."[98] Eva has steadfastly ignored her husband's unfaithfulness throughout their married life and forced herself to pretend their life together has been idyllic. As Barbro Ekman points out, Eva is aware that she has abandoned all the potential rewards of her talents as a singer for the sake of George's love, so "she demands love in return," and "wants George to be her whole life."[99] Eva's philosophy, based solely on her memories of past triumphs in waltzes and her illusions that George still adores her, is passed onto the young Jenny Blair. Jenny, being at odds with her mother and aunts, sees Eva as the ideal she would like to become. Many times during the novel Eva confides her thoughts to Jenny Blair: "You will understand . . . better when you are older. You will know then that a great love doesn't leave room for anything else in a woman's life. It is everything . . . You can never give up too much for happiness." (*TSL*, 76-77)

Jenny Blair truly admires Eva, but an incident suddenly transfers her affections to her husband. One afternoon, Jenny Blair dares to skate to the forbidden area of the town where the horrid stench comes from, down Canal Street. She trips and hurts her head, losing consciousness for a while. She

[97] Marcelle Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982) 14.
[98] Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 86.

[99] Barbro Ekman, *The End of a Legend: Ellen Glasgow's History of Southern Women* (Stockholm: Uppsala, 1979) 63.

comes to in the house of Memoria, the beautiful mulatto laundress who does the washing for the Archbalds and the Birdsongs. She is surprised to find George Birdsong there, moving at ease about the house. The setting, Memoria's neighbourhood, is invisible and forbidden to all 'sheltered' women, and comfortably allows George his infidelities. He hints that Jenny Blair will become a beauty some day, and teases her into promising she will never tell anyone about their secret. In this crucial scene, as Linda Wagner-Martin points out, "Jenny Blair . . . succumb[s] to male manipulation. She covers for George and his affair with Memoria. Worse, Jenny begins the flirtation that eventually leads to her complete enthrallment." [100]

From that point onwards, Jenny Blair starts liking George better than Eva, and tacitly accepts the double sexual standard, thrilled by seeing George with his mulatto mistress. While Jenny Blair venerates Eva's beauty and seeks her companionship, she makes an allegiance with George. The incident with Memoria constitutes the first stage in Jenny Blair's training in the Southern ideal of womanhood: while she substitutes female companionship for rivalry and competition, she learns that a proper lady must learn to ignore certain aspects of the gentlemen around her. The irony in Memoria's name represents Glasgow's tribute to the plight of coloured women, while it stresses the fact that pretending to ignore Memoria's presence only perpetuates male exploitation of both black and white women. Through this character, as Susan Goodman asserts, "Glasgow intertwines social history and private lives." She "testifies to the impossibility of separating her history from that of Jenny Blair and the other women of Queenborough", [101] since both black and white women are trapped in the same code that deprives them of autonomy.

The waltzing party climaxes the first part of the novel, where George and Eva waltz together as in old times and she appears as beautiful as ever. However, when George steals off to the garden with Delia Barron, one of the youngest beauties of Queenborough, Eva has a nervous breakdown and is promptly reprimanded by a female friend:

> 'You don't do any good by giving way, darling. No woman does . . . You gain nothing in the world by not saving your pride.'
> 'But I saw them, Mary. I saw them with my own eyes – '
> 'Hush, Eva. It is much wiser to pretend that you didn't. Even if you know, it is safer not to suspect anything.'
> 'I'm flesh and blood. I've sacrificed everything.' (*TSL*, 117-118)

[100] Wagner-Martin, 'Glasgow's Time in *The Sheltered Life*', 199.

[101] Susan Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 190.

This is the only instance in the first part of the novel that openly shows Eva's frustration, and the scene takes place in the privacy of one of the bedrooms. Given Eva's effort to maintain a façade of happiness in marriage, the reader assumes that she has never publicly reacted to George's infidelities. Learning of her sudden sickness, George hurries back to take Eva home, as loving and solicitous as always.

Julius Rowan Raper acknowledges that George's flirtation with the nine-year-old Jenny Blair leads to her becoming a flirt and thus arrests her self-development. However, he surprisingly excuses George's misconduct by arguing that "because Eva allows Archbald's ideal to put an end to her natural self, the reader understands why George finds himself longing for the energy, vivacity, and sexuality of younger women like Memoria, Delia Barron, and Jenny Blair."[102] George married Eva precisely because she embodied the ideal of the womanly woman to perfection, which she has struggled to sustain despite the failure of their marriage — and at the cost of her own integrity of self. Therefore, my impression is that George's infidelities are very difficult to justify for the twenty-first-century female reader. To my mind, the fact that George worships his wife's statuesque beauty while he looks for more "lively" company elsewhere only highlights his hypocrisy and his double sexual standard. Actually, George's desire for the "vivacity" of active female sexuality is an instance of the brutality of Southern patriarchy, since the artificial standard of womanhood that Eva has internalised necessarily kills women into beautiful (and lifeless) objects for admiration. Barbro Ekman also refers to the incident in the waltzing party when he states that Eva "becomes ill" on purpose "in order to make him feel remorse." Again as in the case of Virginia Pendleton, Ekman practically

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[102] Julius Rowan Raper, *From the Sunken Garden: the Fiction of Ellen Glasgow, 1916-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) 198.

blames Eva for her present situation, saying that "when he [George] cannot live up to her expectations, she becomes insanely jealous", and quotes General Archbald's words in the novel: "possessive love makes most of the complications and nearly all the unhappiness in the world." (*TSL*, 252) Ekman goes on to say that she is "not only jealous, she is exacting and sterile as well … [She] demand[s] her rights as a Legend but she never takes part in life. She does not want children."[103] In stating that Eva is childless through choice, Ekman does not mention that Eva suffers from a strange illness that forces her to undergo surgery in the last part of the novel, and which has also probably rendered her sterile. Actually, Part Three in the novel is mainly devoted to the account of Eva's operation and convalescence.

Although Glasgow never explicitly mentions this possibility, it is not unlikely that Eva's mysterious disease might have been caused by George's promiscuity. Indeed, fin-de-siècle and early twentieth-century feminist literature often features women who contract venereal diseases (especially syphilis) as a result of their husbands' promiscuous habits. As Elaine Showalter contends, "feminists regarded venereal disease as one of the terrible secrets of marriage which women were never told."[104] Similarly, as Janet Beer and Ann Heilmann argue in their essay on Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Sarah Grand, "the hidden danger of venereal disease — a secret kept from half the population to the other half — is the largest threat to the youthful physical and intellectual promise they can envisage."[105] Furthermore, Ekman seems to ignore the fact

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[103] Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, 63.
[104] Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992) 196.
[105] Janet Beer and Ann Heilmann, '"If I Were a Man": Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sarah Grand and the Sexual Education of Girls', in Janet Beer and Bridget Bennett, eds., *Special Relationships: Anglo-American Affinities and Antagonisms 1854-1936* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 181. For further information on this topic see, for example, Elaine Showalter, 'Syphilis, Sexuality, and the Fiction of the *Fin de Siècle*', in Lyn Pykett, ed., *Reading Fin de Siècle Fictions* (London: Longman, 1996) pp.166-183; Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Fiction: Women Writing First-Wave Feminism* (London: Macmillan, 2000) 78-87; Andrew Smith, 'Reading Syphilis: the Politics of Disease', in *Victorian Demons: Medicine, Masculinity, and the Gothic at the Fin-de-Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004) 95-118; Ann Heilmann, 'Narrating the Hysteric: Fin-de-Siècle Medical Discourse and Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly*

that Eva's jealousy is not "insane" at all but very real, and that expecting one's husband to be faithful is quite normal. Considering she has tolerated his numerous infidelities for twelve years without a single murmur of protest, and that she only asks her husband for love in return, it seems quite unfair to me to define Eva as possessive and manipulative. In fact, living with a man who only regards her as a beautiful object is what actually makes her become insane, as I will contend further on this chapter.

The second part of the novel, "The Deep Past", takes place eight years later in the conscience of General Archbald. He becomes lost in reveries of his youth, and recalls how his desires to be a poet and his love for a married woman in London were shattered by conventions and duty. While living in London, David Archbald fell in love with a married woman and planned to elope with her, but on the eve of their elopement one of her children became sick and she stayed to take care of him. After that day he abandoned her and went to Paris, and some months later he learned that the lady in question had committed suicide. After going back to Virginia and fighting in the Civil War, an accident made him marry Erminia. During an excursion, his sleigh was broken in the forest during a snowstorm and they could not go back until daybreak, so he proposed the next morning because he thought it was his duty to save her reputation. Although they never loved each other, they raised a son and two daughters and lived comfortably, and he was faithful to her for over thirty years. Now that Erminia is dead, he cherishes hopes of falling in love again, but these hopes are hindered by the thought of the four helpless women who live under his roof and take such pains to make him happy and comfortable. He sees his life as an endless succession of playing the appropriate roles, being surrounded by women who have inspired his sympathy more than his passion.

From his memories of the past, General Archbald leaps into the present for a while and thinks of his adored Eva Birdsong, who is suffering from an indeterminate cancer and is about to undergo what the reader presumes is a hysterectomy.[106] Brought up in the chivalric tradition of the antebellum South, he idealises and pities Eva more than anyone else, since her operation will presumably affect her beauty. However, the same principle of evasive idealism also allows Archbald to condone George's infidelities with the usual sexual double standard of the

Twins', in Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis, eds., *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001) 123-136.

[106] The fact that the disease or the operation is never clearly defined (it is actually unspeakable) seems to substantiate this idea. The reader infers that Eva could be undergoing a hysterectomy, since the gravity of her illness and the need for a life-threatening operation suggests a cancer or a serious venereal disease. The dialogue between General Archbald and George while Eva is being operated on clearly hints at this possibility:
"'Many women have gone through this, my dear boy, and lived happily. John assured Cora that there is no sign of — that there is not the slightest sign of an incurable malady.'
'Bridges says that, too, but there must be a test. He can't be absolutely sure until afterwards.'" (*TSL*, 249)

Southern cavalier. He implies that George still adores his wife even though he has been unfaithful on numerous occasions and keeps a mulatto mistress. He excuses George's behaviour by arguing that "all that side of his life has no more to do with his devotion to Eva than if — than if it were malaria from the bite of a mosquito. That's what women, especially women like Eva, are never able to understand." Later, he generalises further, admitting "that life would be more agreeable if women could realise that man is not a monogamous animal, and that even a man in love does not necessarily wish to love all the time." (*TSL*, 132-137)

General Archbald is thus the spokesman for tradition. His evasive idealism causes him to regard Eva as a beautiful ideal to be worshipped, but does not allow him to see her as a human being with human needs. He thinks that "nature had ceased to make queenly women" (*TSL*, 257) and that "life would never again melt and mingle into the radiance that was Eva Birdsong." (*TSL*, 379) The General's opinion is that Eva's endurance of George's infidelities is heroic instead of pitiable, and that "personality . . . could reach no higher," (*TSL*, 379) when Eva is precisely, as Wagner defines her, "the epitome of selflessness."[107] Her tragedy is the same that destroyed the life of Virginia Pendleton: she abandons all her personal aspirations for love only and is denied even that. She internalises the ideal that society demands of its women only to be abandoned on her pedestal, and becomes empty of identity when she realises that the man for whom she sacrificed everything (including her health) worships the ideal she represents but does not love her.

Part Three, "The Illusion", starts with General Archbald waking up from his dozing and going to hospital to visit Eva. He is accompanied by Jenny Blair, now approaching eighteen and eager to leave Queenborough and go to New York. Glasgow ironically highlights Jenny's shallowness in her desire to be modern and unconventional, since she has not decided whether she would like to become "an actress or a suffragette." (*TSL*, 182) Eva is passively lying in her bed, waiting for the surgeon and once more excusing her husband's misconduct. Instead of being concerned about her operation and the potential threat to her life it represents, her only worries circle around George: she makes Archbald promise that he will provide moral support to her husband both in his anxious waiting and after the operation. Meanwhile, Jenny Blair has a romantic encounter with poor distressed George in the hospital garden, finally enticing him to stolen kisses. Although she is torn between her attraction for George and an awful sense of guilt for betraying her friend, she convinces herself that she cannot harm Eva for cherishing a secret desire for George, and that she cannot be blamed for being in love. Once more, the life that shelters women from ugliness and, ultimately, from real life, makes Jenny Blair believe that kissing George is not really her fault. Eva's young doctor and cousin John Welch provides a contrasting, more sceptical perspective of life, full of pessimism and desire for change. Although he likes Jenny Blair, he openly criticises women's upbringing within that shelter, which reduces their world to physical appearance and their minds to romantic illusions:

> You don't care about anything but yourself . . . Oh, I know you better than you think! You are like every other young girl who has grown up without coming in touch with the world. You are so bottled up inside that your imagination has turned

[107] Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 88.

> into a hothouse for sensation. I can look into your mind – I can look into any girl's mind – and see every one of you busy faking emotion. Good God! (*TSL*, 338)

Although John Welch stands for the materialism and cynicism of the young generations, which Glasgow disapproves of, he nevertheless voices the author's condemnation of the social and moral principles that have victimised Eva. As he concludes before Eva's operation, "all the conditions of her life are unnatural. I honestly believe . . . that she has never drawn a natural breath since she was married. If she dies . . . it will be the long pretense of her life that has killed her." (*TSL*, 207)

After the operation, which can be read as a symbolic end of her womanhood, Eva's beauty is impaired and, for her, loss of beauty at forty-two means a complete loss of personality. Her unnamed disease, as Goodman remarks, represents the artificial conditions of her life within the cult of True Womanhood.[108] To my mind, it also signifies the sickening effects of that life, which destroy women's bodies as well as their minds. Those who admire her — not *her*, but the myth her beauty represents in the South — see her as if she had lost all hope: "to see her changed, stricken, defeated by life, with all her glory dragged in the dust, was too terrible. It was not that she had lost youth alone, but that she had lost everything." (*TSL*, 362) She suffers from a postoperative nervous breakdown and behaves wildly, laughing and weeping, breaking into attacks of panic, and wandering alone in the streets. As I contended at the beginning of this chapter, her adherence to the male ideal she has been forced to embody is now the cause of her self-destruction. Eva has always lived only as a projection of the male gaze and, since her identity is based on the effect she causes in others, she believes she has lost everything only because those around her have ceased to admire her beauty.

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[108] Susan Goodman contends that Eva's disease "seems to be nowhere and everywhere – in breast and womb and mind – as ubiquitous as the air she breathes or the myth she lives." See Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 190.

Ekman argues that Eva is a less likeable character than Virginia Pendleton, because "whereas Virginia lives for her husband and children, sacrificing herself unselfishly to the extent even of giving up her husband, Eva lives only for herself."[109] It seems quite striking to me to classify Eva as selfish, when she has precisely lost her integrity to fulfil male expectations (and, more specifically, her husband's) and become the ideal they cherish. However, I agree with Ekman's view that "he is not worth her sacrifice."[110] Similarly, Julius Rowan Raper argues that Eva's long convalescence after the operation, "for which the doctors can find no cause", reveals her use of invalidism to inspire her husband's pity, just as her nervous breakdown at the waltzing party thwarted his flirtation with Delia Barron.[111] Feigning invalidism, as Glasgow repeatedly illustrates in her fiction, is most probably a socially acceptable way for Eva to retain her husband's attention, if not his affection. However, I believe that Eva's prolonged illness is, like her disease, the external manifestation of the continuing process of self-destruction that her life as the embodiment of a myth has caused. In this last part of the novel, Eva precisely admits the failure that this life has meant for her. Her personal ambition and her potential as an opera singer were, as her married name ironically indicates, caged in marriage and domesticity, so she explicitly warns Jenny Blair not to stake her whole life on a single chance:

> 'But it must be wonderful,' Jenny Blair sighed enviously. 'People love you without your having to take the least bit of trouble.'
> 'Oh, you do take trouble if you have a reputation to keep up, and no fame on earth is as exacting as a reputation for beauty. Even if you give up everything else for the sake of love, as I did, you are still a slave to fear. Fear of losing love. Fear of losing the power that won love so easily. I sometimes think that there is nothing so terrible for a woman,' she said passionately, while her thin hands clutched at the blown curtains, 'as to be loved for her beauty . . . I staked all my happiness on a single

[109] Ekman, *The End of a Legend,* 62.
[110] Ibid., 63.
[111] Raper, *From the Sunken Garden,* 144.

> chance. I gave up all the little joys for the sake of the one greatest joy. Never do that, Jenny Blair.' (*TSL*, 283-284)

In *Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels*, Pamela K. Gilbert interestingly writes that "the healthy person identifies totally with his or her body, without being aware of the body as such, but pain or discomfort makes us aware of our bodies, and in those moments we construct ourselves as alienated from them."[112] Similarly, Eva's operation and convalescence also mark a symbolic separation from her long-established status as the reigning belle of Queenborough. Nevertheless, her physical sickness instead signifies a painful realisation that her former, apparently 'healthy', self is really a make-believe. In my view, she actually comes to realise that this artificial, male-defined self is precisely the source of both her illness and her *dis*-ease. However excruciating the process, Eva needs to detach herself from the unnatural and unfulfilling life she has led and find her true self. As she confides to Jenny Blair, her wanderings in the street are the means to escape the false illusion of happiness she has had at home with George. She needs to "get away from myself — or the part of myself I leave in the house." She admits to the young girl that "when you've never been yourself for forty years, you've forgotten what you are really . . . I'm worn out with being somebody else — with being somebody's ideal . . . I want to turn around and be myself for a little while before it is too late." (*TSL*, 384-385)

In *From the Sunken Garden*, Raper asserts that "Eva Birdsong's effort to evade reality . . . is a desperate struggle, against the combined pressure of society and biology, to preserve her

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[112] Pamela K. Gilbert, *Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 43.

sanity."[113] Although this is certainly the case in the first two parts of the novel, I would add that, in the last part of the novel, Eva's striving for survival lies in her need to extricate herself from that artificial self. The awareness and (very importantly) the articulation of her tragedy precisely constitute, to my mind, Eva's last and most frenetic attempt to retain any portion of physical and mental health she might have left. As Linda Wagner-Martin notes, "ideas that sound most like Julia Kristeva's concepts of women's worlds and time are clearest in Glasgow's 1932 novel . . . [it is] their shared knowledge that allows Eva to shape her anger into act."[114] By transmitting her story to Jenny Blair, Eva comes to understand her life and voice her frustration for the first time. However, Jenny Blair is incapable of learning from Eva's experience and betrays her only friend, thus replicating Eva's failure and conforming to an idea of femininity that conceives of relationships among women only in terms of rivalry. According to Wagner-Martin,

> Glasgow gives us a probing story, a strangely contemporary story, especially in Eva's evolution to self through her love for someone other than herself, her love for her only 'child,' Jenny Blair. The bond between the two is the heart of the novel; in many places, it becomes the 'plot.' . . . Eva comes to understand her own life by trying to explain it — and all women's lives — to Jenny Blair. She thinks she is sharing her hard-won, bitter wisdom with this girl who is her surrogate, same-sex, constant friend-child. She is giving Jenny Blair all that she has to give. The tragedy of Jenny Blair's co-optation by the very man who has ruined and devaluated *her* life is the event Eva cannot blink from her gaze.[115]

Glasgow's condemnation of the cult of true womanhood seems to reach a thoroughly gloomy conclusion in *The Sheltered Life*. In contrast to Dorinda, who succeeds in overcoming her mother's self-effacement, Jenny replicates Virginia Pendleton in the fact that she is unable to learn from the experiences of the women around her. However, Virginia's mother failed to articulate her frustration while Eva consciously attempts to explain her story for the benefit of her surrogate daughter. Unfortunately, Jenny Blair does not listen.

In order to exorcise her past, Eva inevitably has to face the truth about George. When she comes down to the library and finds him embracing Jenny Blair, she shoots him dead with the hunting gun he has just left nearby.[116] General Archbald and John Welch arrive to

[113] Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, 142-143.
[114] Wagner-Martin, 'Glasgow's Time in *The Sheltered Life*', 197-198.

[115] Ibid., 202.
[116] Significantly, George has just arrived from a hunting party and has left some dead ducks on the kitchen table. Apart from being an obvious (and ironic) premonition of his death, and given Glasgow's well-known fondness for animals, images of hunting or unkindness towards animals in her fiction always endow the character with negative connotations.

ascertain that the murder has really been an accident, protecting Eva from going to prison and Jenny Blair from facing her responsibility in the tragedy she has been part of. The final tragedy does not serve to dissipate the suffocating atmosphere in which these female characters are trapped. The old patriarchal order that keeps women conveniently sheltered still operates, disguising Jenny Blair's devious conduct and rendering Eva's plight senseless. The sheltered life that Glasgow repeatedly denounces prevents them from reaching social, economic, emotional and psychological maturity, ultimately rendering them incapable of behaving as autonomous beings or even assuming responsibility for their actions. Significantly, Jenny Blair repeats one of her favourite statements while she flies into the protective arms of her grandfather: "I didn't mean anything! I didn't mean anything in the world!" (*TSL*, 395)

As Linda Wagner-Martin states, "in every one of her novels, the way to a positive resolution either was found, or could have been found, in women's bonding, in knowledge as drawn from women's intuition, and in the centrality of women's wisdom."[117] *The Sheltered Life* manifests Glasgow's strong commitment to female affiliation as potentially healing and empowering for women, mainly through Eva's attempt to articulate and transmit her experience for the future benefit of Jenny Blair. However, the bleak ending of the novel signifies the author's gloomy acknowledgement that the message in many women's stories is still being silenced or ignored. By accepting male standards that define her as not-valid because of her lack of beauty, Etta Archbald becomes neurotically ill and literally an invalid. More significantly, internalising patriarchal notions of femininity and becoming the epitome of the womanly woman has even more tragic results for Eva, since George worships the ideal she represents but never quite understands the woman she is. Jenny Blair is doomed to emulate Eva's pathetic life precisely by ignoring Eva's warning narrative of it. Glasgow once more points at the crucial importance of listening to women's stories in order to escape the debilitating discourse of patriarchy. Refusing to listen to her-story, Glasgow seems to comment, condemns women in the novel — and all women — to remain silent, invisible and in-valid. Significantly, Will Brantley notes that Glasgow's autobiography suggests "Glasgow's awareness of her own physical and spiritual

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[117] Wagner-Martin, 'Glasgow's Time in *The Sheltered Life*', 197.

delicacy [and] her need, finally, for another kind of shelter — a shelter she envisions here as the protection and support of another woman."[118]

5.7. Beyond *Dis*-ease: *In This Our Life* (1941) and *Beyond Defeat* (1966).

Summary of the Novels Discussed in this Section:

- ***In This Our Life* (1941)**

Set in Queenborough on the eve of World War II, the novel presents the fifty-nine-year old Asa Timberlake, whose frustrating life has been spent as a menial worker in the tobacco factory that had once belonged to his grandfather. His marriage has also proved miserable: for thirty years, his invalid wife Lavinia has tyrannised over him and the rest of the family by pretending to be ill. Asa can only find happiness in his occasional Sunday afternoons at Kate Oliver's farm: he hopes that Lavinia will inherit enough money from an uncle to be financially independent, so that he will be able to live with Kate. Their eldest daughter Roy is an independent woman who has successfully combined her professional life with her marriage to the surgeon Peter Kingsmill. Her beautiful and spoilt sister Stanley is engaged to the lawyer Craig Fleming, but elopes with Peter just before her wedding. Finding it impossible to live with Stanley, Peter surrenders to excessive drinking and finally commits suicide, after which Stanley comes back to Queenborough. During Stanley's absence, Craig Fleming and Roy have established a bond of friendship that has turned into affection, but Roy realises that Craig has never recovered from his fascination with her sister's beauty. She breaks up her engagement and spends the night with a young Englishman she has just met. The following morning she comes back home to pack her belongings and decides to start a new life far from Queenborough.

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[118] Will Brantley, *Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir: Smith, Glasgow, Welty, Hellmann, Porter, and Hurston* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1993) 110.

- ***Beyond Defeat* (1966)**

A sequel to *In This Our Life* and published posthumously, *Beyond Defeat* describes a day in the life of Roy and Asa Timberlake three years after the end of the former novel. Lavinia has inherited a considerable amount of money from her uncle, so Asa is finally happy working in Kate Oliver's farm, Hunter's Fare. Stanley has moved to Hollywood with her new lover, a cinema producer. The sequel also reveals that, as a consequence of her one-night stand with the unknown Englishman, Roy has given birth to a boy. She has been seriously ill with pneumonia, so she returns to Queenborough because she needs someone to take care of her son Timothy while she goes to the Adirondacks to regain her lost strength. Lavinia refuses to acknowledge an illegitimate child and only agrees to look after Timothy if Roy can convince Asa to return. Kate Oliver generously welcomes the boy to Hunter's Fare and invites Roy to live with them once she recovers. The novel ends with Lavinia's death, the promise of Roy's return to Hunter's Fare, and a renewal of the relationship between Roy and Craig Fleming, who offers to marry her and adopt Timothy after he returns from the war.

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> *The "Angelas" of Miss Glasgow's later novels . . . would more fully illustrate the causal connections between the moribund chivalric tradition (especially in its Victorian southern form), evasive idealism, the sheltered life, feminine invalidism, and commonplace feminine tyranny through the solicitation of sympathy.*[119]

According to Linda Wagner, Glasgow began writing *In This Our Life* in 1937, but "these were years of increasingly poor health for Glasgow, and progress on this novel was frequently interrupted."[120] Many of her letters evidence that her creativity was increasingly curtailed by her frail condition: for example, as she wrote to H.L. Mencken in January 1939, she had to live "the life of an invalid" but still hoped to finish the last novel she would live to see published: "if only my capacity for work

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[119] Julius Rowan Raper, *Without Shelter: the Early Career of Ellen Glasgow* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971) 224-225.
[120] Linda W. Wagner, *Ellen Glasgow: Beyond Convention* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982) 110.

will last as long as I do, I shall feel that I am satisfied." (*LL*, 248-249) Her first heart attack occurred in December 1939, and she experienced a second one on August 9, 1940.[121]

In the summer of 1940, Glasgow spent a month in a hospital in New York where, according to Goodman's biography, "the cardiologist told her that she might live six weeks or six months."[122] After her period of recovery, she left for Castine, Maine, accompanied of course by Anne Virginia Bennett. She was forbidden to walk and only allowed to work for a few minutes every day. When *In This Our Life* was published in 1941 after the author's long struggle against illness, as Wagner asserts, Glasgow "felt it a personal triumph."[123] Believing that this would be the last novel she would ever write, Glasgow took special care of every detail during its production and subsequent publication. She relied on her friend and fellow Virginian, the Richmond writer James Branch Cabell, to help her with revisions of the chapters. She also gave instructions to her publisher, Alfred Harcourt, about the printing, advertising, and design of the book jacket among other aspects.[124] In 1942, *In This Our Life* was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for the year 1941 although, as Goodman argues, it was more of a recognition to her whole literary career than a specific acknowledgement of the novel's quality.[125] According to several Glasgow scholars, Glasgow had been deeply disappointed when T. S. Stribling won the Pulitzer for *The Store* in 1933, although Glasgow's *The Sheltered Life* (1932) was a clear favourite to the award.[126]

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[121] According to the data provided by Susan Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 228.
[122] Ibid., 228.

[123] Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 111.
[124] See Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 228-231. In her letter to Alfred Harcourt, (November 27, 1940) Glasgow specifically asked her book to be printed "in large, clear, open type", since she did not want the novel "to appear shorter" to her readers. In her usual ironic Glasgow style, she remarked that "my eyes have not yet recovered from the small, close, glaring type of the new Virginia Woolf book." *LL*, 271.
[125] Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 236.
[126] See, for example, Marcelle Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982) xii; or Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 91.

Like *The Sheltered Life*, *In This Our Life* is set in the fictional town of Queenborough, starting in 1938 and ending in 1939, on the eve of World War II. As Thiebaux among other critics observes, this novel concludes her social history of Virginia, which had started in the Civil War and thus exceeds her fifty years of literary production and even her own lifetime.[127] The opening scene presents Asa, the fifty-nine-year-old downtrodden patriarch of the Timberlake family, who observes the changes taking place in an increasingly industrialised Queenborough while he reflects upon the evolution of his own life. For more than forty-five years, he has been a menial worker in the tobacco factory that had once belonged to his grandfather: this scant salary has served to support his wife Lavinia and their three children, a son and two daughters. After a short period of infatuation, his marriage to Lavinia has proved miserable, although he feels morally responsible for his invalid wife, who is completely dependent on him.

Lavinia Timberlake is the last (and, to my mind, one of the best) of Glasgow's "Angel(a)s." Her constant complaints, her medicines and doctors, and her hypochondria absolutely pervade the novel. Lacking beauty and charm as a young woman, she managed to induce Asa into marriage by making him believe he was in love with her. For thirty years, she has tyrannised over him and the rest of the family by pretending to be ill. Rouse defines Lavinia as "one of the most insufferably repulsive creations ever encountered in the pages of fiction. She is selfish, soft, sentimental and cruel — but she is by no means a fool."[128] Rouse's final remark probably refers to Asa's acknowledgement of his wife's intelligence: "after all, Lavinia might be a fraud, but she was nobody's fool." (*ITOL*, 38) Barbro Ekman also comments on this point in his description of Lavinia as one of Glasgow's "victimisers": he argues that, while Angela Gay and Angelica Blackburn

[127] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 163.

[128] Blair Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962) 124-125.

control their families through weakness but never openly admit it, Lavinia consciously decides to become a chronic invalid.[129] Like her predecessors in Glasgow's earlier works of fiction, she is aware of the empowering possibilities of feigning invalidism and has voluntarily embraced the tradition of female self-immolation in order to use it as a weapon. As Julius Rowan Raper states, "Lavinia

> . . . is one of the grotesque invalids the sheltered life makes of women; during twelve years . . . she succeeds in tyrannizing her family as she never could in good health."[130]

As has been illustrated, critics have abundantly discussed Lavinia's character as the personification of everything that is malicious and disgusting. Nevertheless, her cruelty and egotism ultimately inspire more pity than contempt, since her self-centredness paradoxically reveals a total lack of self. In his analysis of *In This Our Life*, Raper refers to Lavinia's control over Asa as "matriarchal tyranny", disregarding the fact that the cult of invalidism is a male construct. What he terms as "the tyranny of Lavinia's tradition"[131] is actually not a female tradition but a patriarchal invention, whose first victim is Lavinia herself. Upon reflection, her perverse pleasure in tormenting her husband is, to my mind, evidence of her miserable life and her emptiness and as a person. Her internalisation of the cult of True Womanhood and its adjoining values of dependence, selflessness and extreme delicacy have indeed turned her into a monster. However, I believe it is worth remembering that she is a pathetic example of the atrocious beings that patriarchal ideals make of women, which have above all destroyed the woman Lavinia could have been. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes, the invalid, like the hysteric, has "purchased her escape from the emotional

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[129] See Barbro Ekman, *The End of a Legend: Ellen Glasgow's History of Southern Women* (Stockholm: Uppsala, 1979) 97-98.

[130] Raper, *Without Shelter*, 247.

[131] Julius Rowan Raper, *From the Sunken Garden: The Fiction of Ellen Glasgow, 1916-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) 173, 185.

. . . demands of her life only at the cost of pain, disability, and an intensification of women's traditional passivity and dependence."[132]

Goodman posits that Glasgow wanted this novel "to communicate whatever wisdom she had gained from suffering and joy."[133] As previous chapters have mentioned, Ann Gholson's debilitating legacy of invalidism and disempowerment was always present in the author's life, at this period perhaps more than ever. As late as 1942, Glasgow still recalled her mother's breakdown in a letter to her friend Bessie Zaban Jones and remembered how, as a child, she pictured her as "a beautiful shadow."[134] The bittersweet knowledge that she had gained from a lifetime of love, friendship, ill health and loss, as well as the severe heart condition she was suffering at that period, are plausibly the reason why disease is present in *In This Our Life* more than in any other of Glasgow's novels. In *The Sheltered Life*, Eva's indeterminate disease is a physical manifestation of the incapacitating effects of internalising the ideal of True Womanhood, which also affect most of the other female characters. Similarly, although in a much more tangible way, Lavinia's condition seems to serve as a visible emblem for the complete disempowerment that adherence to this code entails. There is an all-encompassing sense of illness that seems to pervade every chapter and almost every character in the novel.[135]

The pernicious influence of Lavinia's illness is perceived most effectively in the unambiguous contrast Glasgow establishes between her two daughters, Roy and Stanley. Stanley represents the fashionable and superficial beauty, who looks modern in appearance but is still

[132] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America' in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985) 197-217.

[133] Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 232.
[134] *LL*, 303-304. Letter to Bessie Zaban Jones (July 20, 1942).
[135] Blair Rouse mentions this point, although he argues that Lavinia's feigned invalidism essentially stands for a "sick" society. See Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 128.

defined according to Victorian male standards.[136] Roy, in contrast, and as her father reflects, has "all the qualities . . . that men have missed and wanted in women: courage, truthfulness, a tolerant sense of humor, loyalty to impersonal ends." (*ITOL*, 18-19) Some readers have considered that Glasgow's choice of names for the two Timberlake sisters responded to an implicit attempt of endowing them with masculine qualities. Glasgow herself gave her reasons for that choice in her preface to the novel:

> I have been asked so often why I used the names Roy and Stanley for girls, instead of for boys, that I seize this opportunity to reply: The calling of girls by family names is a familiar practice in Virginia, especially when there are few boys to consider. (*CM*, 258)

Roy would be, Glasgow continues, "an abbreviation for Fitzroy, and she had, it is safe to assume, been christened Lavinia Fitzroy in St. Luke's Episcopal Church." In her non-fiction writings, Glasgow has repeatedly argued that her characters have a life of their own and often choose their own names: "Oddly enough, I tried once to change her name to Rhoda, and she immediately went into a trance." (*CM*, 258)

Roy Timberlake is one of Glasgow's by now classical iron-veined women, like Dorinda Oakley in *Barren Ground* or Ada Fincastle in *Vein of Iron*. The reader immediately identifies Roy with her father and his moral qualities: she is sensible, intelligent, hard-working, and conscious of her mother's deceptiveness. Apart from Kate Oliver, Roy is the only character who understands and sympathises with Asa's miserable and unfulfilling life, while the rest of the family tend to regard him as ruined because of his father's decline in wealth and social status. She is a modern and

[136] Thiebaux argues that Glasgow pictures Stanley as a newer version of the Victorian Southern lady, "who inherited the evasive idealism of her forebears but not their self-restraint." See Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 164.

thoroughly independent woman, who has successfully combined marriage with professional life — or so she thinks. While she works in an interior decorating shop, she is passionately in love with her surgeon husband Peter Kingsmill: however, as she tells her father, "he knows I'd never hold him" and both are "perfectly free to change if we wish." (*ITOL*, 31-32) Her beautiful, selfish and spoilt sister Stanley is engaged to the lawyer Craig Fleming, but she takes a fancy for her attractive brother-in-law. Just before her wedding with Craig, Stanley and Peter elope together. Roy is of course devastated but, like Glasgow's former strong women, she refuses to be defeated by her husband's betrayal: she grants Peter a divorce so that he and Stanley can marry and carries on with her life. In contrast, after Stanley deserts him, Craig Fleming shows his weakness by succumbing to self-pity and abusing alcohol.

The Timberlakes' younger daughter Stanley is probably one of the most powerful images of the omnipresent atmosphere of sickness as *dis*-ease in the novel, of course after her mother. She embodies the prototype of the stunningly beautiful blonde who lives only for her appearance and who believes that her beauty entitles her to anything. Her marriage to Peter Kingsmill proves a disaster, since Stanley spends money beyond their means, goes out with other men, and aborts a baby. Peter, whom Glasgow portrays from the beginning as shallow and lacking in moral strength,[137] cannot cope with his life with Stanley, surrenders to excessive drinking and finally commits suicide. Stanley comes back to Queenborough in a wrecked state of mind and, predictably, she is pitied and sheltered by her family. Her loveliness and her long "convalescence", which clearly emulate her mother's façade of illness and suffering, enable her to escape her share of guilt for breaking her sister's marriage and providing the stimulus to Peter's suicide.

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[137] As early as chapter V, Asa prophetically observes that Peter "has the hands, but not the temperament, of a surgeon." (*ITOL*, 41)

In her book of prefaces, Glasgow argues that Stanley is not consciously wicked but simply driven by her desires and her appeal to others: "she is not evil; she is insufficient. She is not hard; she is, on the contrary, so soft in fibre that she is ruled or swayed by sensation. She embodies the perverse life of unreason . . . which destroys its own happiness." (*CM*, 259) In turn, Glasgow condemns the family's obvious predilection for Stanley, which evidences, as Thiebaux notes, that "males esteem female sexuality, turpitude, and weakness over intelligence and independence."[138] Obviously taking Lavinia as a role model, Stanley soon learns that an appearance of frailty and helplessness is a powerful weapon she can use to her own advantage. Still, she ignores the fact that, like her mother, her acquiescence to that tradition implies a complete loss of identity that is ultimately self-destructive. In Stanley, Glasgow typifies the conventional woman who, as late as 1939, has been invalidated by her own power to lure men. As a result of her internalisation of that stereotype, she can only define her existence as a mirror of the male gaze, that is, in terms of the effect her feminine charm elicits in men.

Blair Rouse compares Stanley with Jenny Blair Archbald in *The Sheltered Life*, since both characters embody "the evils of sham, of happiness-hunters, and of dangerous selfishness masquerading as evil." He asserts that Stanley's loveliness enables her "to twist men and sentimental women about her finger", while her apparent innocence and sweetness conceal "an insidious evil quality more dangerous than poison. She is completely amoral . . . If she wants something, then she must have it . . . she knows no remorse, only fear of punishment."[139] In his description, Rouse reveals Stanley's childish behaviour, motivated only by desire but, in my view, he overlooks the fact that the same system that grants her immunity also disempowers her. Like

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[138] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 170.
[139] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 124-126. Raper similarly defines Stanley as "an irresponsible innocent like Jenny Blair." See Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, 174.

Jenny Blair, she eludes responsibility for her actions precisely because, in a male-defined society, she does not hold the status of a mature, independent and autonomous human being.

After her period of convalescence, Stanley goes back to her former thoughtless and irresponsible conduct. In the attempt to escape the emptiness and meaninglessness of her life, she turns to reckless driving in the expensive sports car her uncle Fitzroy bought her. One night, she accidentally runs over a woman and her young daughter, killing the child as a result. Unsurprisingly, instead of admitting to the crime, she runs away from the scene, leaves her car in the black area of the town and comes back home. When the police arrive to make inquiries about the car, she indirectly accuses Parry Clay, the young and worthy coloured chauffeur, and Parry is immediately arrested and imprisoned. Stanley's family believes her story without question, although her father notices the incongruities in her version and makes her confess. Asa, however, finds himself alone in his struggle to act ethically: his family tries to convince him that it is not advisable to tell the truth to the authorities. Of course, Stanley succeeds in appearing as an innocent victim by resorting to hysterical weeping and appealing to the protection of her mother, her uncle, and Craig:

> 'You're cruel to me. You never loved me . . . It's only you. The others wouldn't be cruel. . . . Oh, Mother, oh, Uncle William, he wants to make me go to court! He wants to send me to prison! Oh, Uncle William, don't let him!' . . . It was Charlotte who, at last and too abruptly, shattered the silence. 'She ought to have bromide or something. You'd better send for the doctor.'
> 'She isn't herself,' Lavinia whispered. 'Asa has nearly killed her.'
> (*ITOL*, 267-270)

Uncle Fitzroy insists in concealing the truth by arguing that "that's no way to treat a child" and that "she couldn't stand anything more." Craig, who is mesmerised by Stanley's helplessness, betrays his principles and agrees with Fizroy that "we'll do the best we can for the boy." Charlotte

Fitzroy, uncle William's wife, similarly argues it is best to let Parry be sentenced on the grounds that "colored people don't feel things the way we do . . . not as a young girl would." (*ITOL*, 270-271) Remarkably, Charlotte defends conventional femininity when she is precisely another of its victims. While Asa points to Charlotte's apparent simplicity, he has witnessed that "when William was absent one day, he had seen her display actual intelligence and a firm hand with an emergency." (*ITOL*, 41) After her marriage to William, the reader presumes, Charlotte's qualities have been progressively eclipsed by her husband's power and wealth, and she has been forced to assume a more convenient mask of docility.

In This Our Life again echoes *The Sheltered Life* in the fact that Charlotte appeals to Stanley's "truly feminine" sweetness and delicacy to spare her from facing her responsibility. The same patriarchal standards that appropriate women's words and actions operate in *The Sheltered Life*, defining Eva Birdsong's murder of her husband as an accident and obliterating Jenny Blair's participation in the tragedy. On the surface, this is done in order to protect women from the implacability of justice, although these acts reveal the evasive idealism that Glasgow denounces. Helen Fiddyment Levy, for example, comments on the fact that Stanley is repeatedly defined as a baby, a doll, and a child. As she argues, she is a mere "mannequin . . . created by male desire and feminine weakness."[140] Fitzroy and Lavinia, the representatives of evasive idealism, have encouraged her immature behaviour by consistently indulging her, therefore preventing her from developing into adulthood. Under the pretence of "sheltering" women from the unpleasant aspects of life, this standard perpetuates their powerlessness under patriarchy through the denial of their status as mature human beings.

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[140] Helen Fiddyment Levy, 'Coming Home: Glasgow's Last Two Novels', in *Ellen Glasgow: New Perspectives*, Dorothy M. Scura ed. (Knoxville: the University of Tennessee Press, 1995) p. 227. For further information on this point see Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, 174.

Through the plight of the Clay family, Glasgow devotes special attention to the injustice against black Americans, especially as she felt it in her native South. Although Thiebaux defines Parry as "a slight though sympathetic figure," [141] its creation is, to my mind, an instance of Glasgow's emphatic protest against racial segregation. The author clearly denounces the inequalities between whites and blacks that still existed at all levels of society and that would continue to exist for many years after her death. Commenting on the character of Parry, Louis Auchincloss asserts that "here, at last, is a problem that is real and competently handled." He contends that *In This Our Life* is the only one of her nineteen novels in which Glasgow "faces, however briefly, what the South has done to its colored people."[142] Although previous chapters have already commented on the paternalistic attitude that is sometimes shown towards Glasgow's black characters, the examples of Fluvanna Moody in *Barren Ground* and Memoria in *The Sheltered Life* attest to Glasgow's sincere empathy with coloured people as victims of Southern patriarchy. Luther Y. Gore notes that in her unpublished essay "Literary Realism or Nominalism" Glasgow advocates for a more realistic depiction of black Americans, since she felt that literature (especially in the South) had been either idealistic or evasive about the real situation of blacks living in the South at that period.[143]

According to Goodman, Glasgow probably drew Stanley's accident with the car from real life, since a member of her family was involved in a similar situation.[144] In her preface to the novel,

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[141] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 167.
[142] Louis Auchincloss, *Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965) 83-84.
[143] Luther Y. Gore, '"Literary Realism or Nominalism" by Ellen Glasgow: An Unpublished Essay', in *American Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (March 1962) 77. In her essay, Glasgow states that "there are two permissible fashions in which one may write of the Negro in American fiction today - the fashion of the North which portrays him as a celestial victim in allegory, or the fashion of the South which presents him as the poetic figure of sentimental legend."
[144] Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 233-234. "While in Virginia Beach, one of her nephews fatally injured a black pedestrian in a traffic accident. After his arrest, a friend of the family stood bail. The case never came to trial, though the

Glasgow seems to substantiate Goodman's statement, since her black characters were also shaped as fictional models of real people who in a sense belonged to Glasgow's extended family. For instance, she mentions that the character of Abel Clay is an exact replica of a close acquaintance. Similarly, "Minerva's people had belonged for a hundred and fifty years to my mother's family. Minerva herself is a blended portrait of two sisters, one dead, and one still living in Richmond." (*CM*, 257-258) Despite his sceptical view of Glasgow's treatment of coloured people in her fiction, Auchincloss here acknowledges that their portraits are in some instances "absolutely alive and convincing." He especially remarks the figure of Fluvanna in *Barren Ground*, where "the characterization is as successful as of any of the author's other women."[145]

Stanley finally confesses but is never sentenced, since her race, her social status, and the help of uncle Fitzroy and Craig Fleming provide a convenient shelter. Parry is released, although he cannot recover from the appalling treatment he has received in the Queenborough jail as a black prisoner. Parry's skin is actually very light: in fact, the Clay family is a mixture of white, Indian and black blood. Besides, he is a distant cousin of Roy and Stanley, since he shares in both Fitzroy and Timberlake blood. Parry had been a very bright student at school and cherished hopes of studying law, but his painful experience as a convict reminds him that the standards of justice are different for blacks and whites. Actually, if Asa had not intervened, the otherwise liberal Timberlakes (and especially Craig Fleming, who had promised to help Parry in his way to self-improvement by sending him to Howard University) would have resolutely sacrificed him to conceal Stanley's misconduct. As Goodman observes, Parry ultimately "becomes an instrument —

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widow filed a suit for damages. The prosecuting attorney at the magistrates' court did not think a charge for manslaughter justified . . . Glasgow believed that his family deserved both a personal apology and adequate compensation."

[145] Auchincloss, *Pioneers and Caretakers*, 87.

as his name suggests — of deflection."[146] To my mind, and as is the case with the butler Gabriel in "The Shadowy Third" and other black characters in Glasgow's fiction, Parry is aligned with women in his inferior status as a mulatto. During his arrest, his or his family's version of the events is regarded as not-valid,[147] just as his aspirations of equality are effectively invalidated by white patriarchy.

From my point of view, Parry's tragic end is another of Glasgow's examples of the debilitating effects of patriarchal strictures also as they affect some men. Echoing Jason Greylock's debasement in *Barren Ground*, *In This Our Life* unveils the pernicious consequences that the code of genteel behaviour produces in people of both sexes. Like Dorinda, Roy is surrounded by many female (and some male) characters that, in their weakness and disempowerment, emphasise her moral strength and her endurance. Replicating female imprisonment in the conventions of domesticity, Asa is trapped by his marriage to Lavinia and his duty to provide for the family. As Wagner notes, "even the fact that his father — faced with incurable illness — committed suicide under the old willow is a positive image when set against the mean invalidism of Asa's wife."[148] Rouse significantly classifies Glasgow's "civilised" men like Timberlake as "cripples" even though they are not physically incapacitated. He argues that Asa "has been hurt by circumstance and has sustained a psychic or spiritual wound which has permanently changed him." He describes him as "genuine" in the sense that he "refuses to pretend to himself any longer", becoming "more an observer than a participant."[149] Thiebaux holds a similar view and defines him as "an insensitive observer of what

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[146] Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 232.
[147] On the night the accident occurred, Parry had been at home with his mother. When Asa asks Minerva if she reported that to the police, she significantly answers: "they wouldn't believe me. I'm colored." (*ITOL*, 256)
[148] Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 112.
[149] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 105.

happens to the rest of the family" and as "the irritable mouthpiece of an aging, invalid author who found much to dislike in the world."[150] To my mind, Asa's role in the novel is remarkable precisely because of his capacity for observation, and his participation in the plot is indeed crucial as regards the events connected to the car accident.

Although he might appear dejected, Asa is not without hope: his occasional Sunday afternoon walks with Kate Oliver and (of course) her two pointers give him happiness and peace of mind. Her farm, 'Hunter's Fare', is the haven where he longs to escape from Lavinia's sick and sickening influence. Upon Uncle Fitzroy's death, Asa expects that his wife will inherit enough money to be economically independent, so that he will be able to leave her and live with Kate. William Fitzroy is, very significantly, truly ill with cancer, although he refuses to admit the reality of his condition until it is too late. Fitzroy is regarded as the most prominent man in Queenborough because he has amassed a fortune in business. He is one of Glasgow's 'great men' of the New South who are respected because of their wealth, but who embody everything that is mean and abhorrent. Glasgow's portrait of Uncle Fitzroy recalls previous characters like that of Cyrus Treadwell in *Virginia*, whom Glasgow possibly created as fictional copies of her own father. As Rouse describes him,

> William Fitzroy is a wonderfully repulsive portrait of an avaricious, ruthless, insensitive, yet sentimental Southern man of affairs. He might keep platinum blonde mistresses in New York, but he is a faithful worshipper at the Episcopal Church in Queenborough.[151]

Uncle Fitzroy, as Rouse asserts, is obviously partial to Stanley, "because of his lecherous, more than avuncular interest in his full-lipped, bright-haired niece." While Stanley has learnt how

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[150] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 169.
[151] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 125. Julius Rowan Raper similarly describes him as "[t]he foremost robber baron of the South." See Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, 176.

to use her flirtatious charm to obtain money and expensive presents from her great-uncle, Roy has refused "to prostitute herself to his attentions."[152]

During Stanley's absence, Craig and Roy have established a bond of friendship that has turned into affection. Craig's attachment to her, as Rouse remarks, is grounded on his belief that Roy "has rescued him from himself and despair"; similarly, his attempts to convince her into marriage are mainly motivated by the fact that "he needs her."[153] Despite his liberal ideas and his apparent modernity, Craig's affection for Roy reproduces the patriarchal assumption that women are responsible for uplifting men spiritually and saving them from their weak nature. As is the case with Peter Kingsmill, Glasgow plainly depicts Craig Fleming as a flawed partner for Roy. Both Peter and Craig claim to admire her moral qualities but, although they belong to a new generation of men, both desert her for the more appealing (and less threatening?) standard of womanhood that Stanley represents.

Roy's suspicions about Craig's shallowness are finally confirmed when he loyally supports Stanley after the car accident, and afterwards when he compromises his integrity as a lawyer by betraying Parry. Roy realises that Craig has never recovered from his fascination with her sister's beauty, so she breaks up her engagement and runs away from the house. While walking the streets of Queenborough in the rainy night, absorbed in her disillusionment, she meets a young Englishman who is about to join the army in Europe, with whom she spends the night. The following morning she comes back home, but only to pack her belongings, since she has decided to leave Queenborough. One of her last sentences in the novel attests to her moral strength; despite all the suffering she has endured, she can still hope for a better future: "I want something to hold by! I

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[152] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 125. Thiebaux also comments on this point; see *Ellen Glasgow*, 165.
[153] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 126.

want something good!" (*ITOL*, 302) Predictably, only her father truly grieves over her departure and understands her words: throughout the novel, his reflections have uncovered conventional family life as the cause of physical, psychological and emotional *dis*-ease.[154] Asa is conscious of the fact that, like himself, Roy needs a more fulfilling existence, which she will not find amidst the suffocating atmosphere of pervading sickness that surrounds her life in Queenborough.

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In her book of prefaces, Glasgow stated that "there is a shock at the discovery that, in print, one must be brutally obvious if one wishes not to be misconstrued." (*CM*, 249) According to several Glasgow scholars, the author was dissatisfied with many of the reviewers' and the readers' approach to the novel, which regarded Roy and, above all, Asa, as failed and dispirited characters.[155] This simplistic reading was probably further encouraged by the Hollywood film version released in 1942, starring Olivia de Havilland as Roy and Bette Davis as Stanley. Glasgow sold the rights to Warner Brothers for $40,000 but, as she feared, the film emphasised the romance plot and the rivalry between the two sisters. Although she finally decided not to publish it, Glasgow felt compelled to write a short sequel to the novel, which she entitled *Beyond Defeat: An Epilogue to an Era*.

On December 31, 1942, Glasgow had another heart attack. As Goodman states, "during the next two years, she did what conceivably kept her alive . . . In August [1944], Glasgow physically

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[154] In her study of *In This Our Life*, Thiebaux describes the institution of family as "a hotbed of ills." See Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 5 and 170.

[155] For further comments on this issue see, for example, Wagner, *Beyond Convention*, 111-113; Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, 177; or Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 129-130.

could not write . . . she could type with just one finger. Even walking proved beyond her."[156] During those final years, she remained confined to her bedroom and (when her condition allowed her to move from her bed or the sofa) the adjoining study. Goodman mentions that one of her intimate friends, Bessie Zaban Jones, remembered visiting Glasgow and visualising her bedroom as a reproduction of her mother's room, "a place steeped in the atmosphere of Victorian ill-health."[157] Despite those difficulties, Glasgow managed to complete her book of prefaces, *A Certain Measure* (1943), which, to her surprise and delight, was widely acclaimed by both critics and readers even though it was a non-fiction work. She also finished her autobiography, *The Woman Within*, which she left in the hands of her literary executors to be published after her death.

Beyond Defeat was completed in 1944 and published posthumously in 1966. Presumably because of the author's condition while writing the novel, critics have often regarded it as a minor work. However, as Helen Fiddyment Levy posits, *Beyond Defeat* helped Glasgow "to resolve the perceived conflict between her own literary art and her gender . . . Glasgow at last found a faith in the future that merged female identity and independent creativity."[158] The novel describes a day in the life of Roy and Asa Timberlake in 1942, three years after the end of *In This Our Life*. Uncle Fitzroy has died, bequeathing a considerable amount of money to Lavinia, so Asa is finally happy working in Kate Oliver's farm. Stanley has moved to Hollywood (ironically, the home of appearances and artificiality) with her new lover, a cinema producer.

The sequel also reveals that, as a consequence of her one-night stand with the unknown Englishman, Roy has given birth to a boy. Critics disagree as regards the significance of Timothy's presence in the novel. Raper, for example, observes that "although for [Glasgow's] males unsanctioned sex is generally an act of vanity and exploitation, for her women it is an act of freedom."[159] In contrast, Thiebaux contends that, despite Glasgow's emphasis on Roy's unconventional sexual behaviour as a symbol of self-assertion, "it has all the makings of a self-destructive act." Although she acknowledges that Roy's status as a single mother has allowed her to "retain her femininity and her independence", she remarks that the three years of illness and poverty she has endured in New York attest to Glasgow's inability "to save her heroine from paying a huge price for these privileges."[160] In my opinion, Timothy personifies Roy's (and, by extension, women's) liberation from the limitations of patriarchal control. Roy can conceive a child outside the

[156] Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 237-239.
[157] Ibid., 237.

traditional family structure and hence fulfil an important aspect of her womanhood without the constraints of a conventional heterosexual relationship.

Roy has been seriously ill with pneumonia, almost on the verge of death, which echoes Glasgow's partial recovery after the serious heart attacks she had suffered.[161] She returns to Queenborough because she needs someone to take care of her son while she goes to the Adirondacks to regain her lost strength. Charlotte Fitzroy, now a well-provided widow, is enjoying a comfortable old age after the long torment of her married life and does not wish to be troubled with the responsibility of caring for the child. Predictably, Lavinia refuses to acknowledge an illegitimate child, and only accepts to look after Timothy if Roy can convince Asa to return. Interestingly, Louis Auchincloss complains at Glasgow's insistence in the victimisation of 'fallen women' when he comments on the character of Millie Burden in *They Stooped to Folly* (1929), the novel that precedes *The Sheltered Life*: "Why then, in 1929, did the author keep flogging so dead a horse? Is it possible that she was beginning to feel that the age of prejudices had at least had standards? That one could only have ladies if one burned witches?"[162] Apparently, as late as 1944, the author felt there was still much to say (and much more to do) about the plight of single mothers.

Kate Oliver generously welcomes the boy to Hunter's Fare and invites Roy to live with them once she is recovered. According to Helen Fiddyment Levy, the creation of Kate responds to the author's lifelong search for the women's voices that had been suffocated under the pressure of a male-defined culture, in an attempt to "reproduce the communal feelings of the woman-centered homeland." Kate is portrayed as a more mature version of Dorinda Oakley, an image of female self-

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[158] Fiddyment Levy, 'Coming Home: Glasgow's Last Two Novels', 220.

[159] Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, 186.
[160] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 167-168.
[161] Several scholars have commented on Roy's recovery as the expression of the author's state of health. See, for example, Fiddyment Levy, 'Coming Home: Glasgow's Last Two Novels', 221; and Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 172.

[162] Auchincloss, *Pioneers and Caretakers*, 79.

fulfilment that implies, as Fiddyment Levy asserts, "that womanliness is an active force for enrichment of both nature and culture."[163] In contrast, Kathryn Lee Seidl argues that "Glasgow's strong protagonists are singularly alone" and contends that her female characters generally do not have the support of other women. She states that

> since their mothers destroy the feeling that home is a safe haven and since men are disappointing at best, one might think Glasgow would have had her heroines turn to friends for comfort and support. Such is not the case. In *The Sheltered Life*, for example, young and pretty Jenny Blair becomes friends with Eva, partially because she envies Eva's beauty but also because she is in love with Eva's husband.[164]

The case of Eva Birdsong is indeed a tragic instance of the isolation that conformity to tradition brings about but, to my mind, *In This Our Life* and *Beyond Defeat* clearly show a brighter future for Glasgow's strong heroines, Roy Timberlake and Kate Oliver. As is the case with Dorinda's network of relatives and friends in *Barren Ground*, Kate's farm attests to Glasgow's endeavour to portray an alternative female world of nurturance. Her self-made home, the product of her physical work as well as of her intuition and imagination, provides a haven for all those who have been enfeebled (and almost destroyed) by the sickening influence of patriarchal conventions.[165] Like Dorinda, Kate is childless, but she provides the fertile soil of warmth and understanding that Glasgow envisions as the ideal home of shared female affection. In contrast, literal mothers like Lavinia, as Fiddyment Levy argues, merely engender psychological and

[163] Fiddyment Levy, 'Coming Home: Glasgow's Last Two Novels', 221, 230.
[164] Kathryn Lee Seidl, 'Gail Godwin and Ellen Glasgow: Southern Mothers and Daughters', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Autumn, 1991), p. 292.

[165] Raper points to Glasgow's view of the traditional family as a source of *dis*-ease when he comments on Kate's alternative concept of 'home': "the false families which our past and our facile emotions have imposed upon us may be replaced by *better* families, families to be created out of the core of our own being." Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, 191-192. [emphasis in original]

emotional barrenness, and ultimately (self)destruction: "the calculating relationships of Fitzroy, Lavinia, and Stanley produce only death, heartache, and sterility."[166]

The novel ends with Lavinia's death, the promise of Roy's return to Hunter's Fare, and a renewal of the relationship between Roy and Craig, who offers to marry her and accept Timothy after he returns from the navy. In her last work of fiction, as Fiddyment Levy states, "Glasgow transcends the victimization that threatens her strongest female protagonists",[167] finally exorcising the shadow of in(-)validism that had haunted both her life and her fiction. As she explains in *The Woman Within*, "my physical weakness, after the heartbreaking strain of a divided life, appeared to lend light and warmth to my imagination. Pain had not defeated me. It had made me defiant and more confident in my inner powers." (*WW*, 270) Despite her poor health and after the writing of a novel pervaded with disease, Glasgow was capable of retaining hope and imagining a fictional homeland were both men and women could overcome sickness and *dis*-ease. As Will Brantley writes while commenting on Glasgow's autobiography, Glasgow understood that "the autobiographical impulse is of necessity a shaping impulse — that ultimately one defines the self by writing the self."[168] The sequel that Glasgow wrote — while thoughts of an impending death most probably troubled her mind — denotes, as Thiebaux posits, "not only a homecoming . . . but astonishingly . . . a return from the grave. The main character, having passed through death's sickly shadow, seems to rise again to a new paradisal world."[169]

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[166] Fiddyment Levy, 'Coming Home: Glasgow's Last Two Novels', 227.
[167] Ibid., 225.

[168] Will Brantley, *Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir: Smith, Glasgow, Welty, Hellmann, Porter, and Hurston* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1993) 93.
[169] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 172.

6. Conclusions.

La donna è mobile
qual piuma al vento,
muta d'accento
e di pensiero.
Giuseppe Verdi, Rigoletto (Act III)

Verdi's famous phrase from *Rigoletto*, so popular that it has become a cliché and therefore a sort of universal truth, sums up all the stereotypes about the essence of the feminine psyche. Volatile and mysterious, woman's capricious nature is closely related to all the values attributed to the Victorian True Woman: physical weakness, intellectual shallowness, and a tendency to irritability, melancholia and insanity. Social attitudes, religious predicaments and medical views in the Victorian period supported one another in sanctioning the doctrine of separate spheres and women's proper place in the family and in society. At the same time that professional male physicians were gaining power and public recognition, thus displacing traditionally female occupations such as midwifery, upper- and middle-class females consistently increased in number as their patients.[170] Inadequate diets, lack of exercise, and an improper and insufficient education almost ensured women's physical weakness and encouraged their tendency to boredom, depression and nervousness. Medical men defined newly discovered mental disorders such as hysteria as deviant in males but as practically 'natural' in females, understanding women's reproductive cycles as an inherent predisposition to insanity.

[170] Elaine Showalter comments on this aspect in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago Press, 1987) 52-53.

Soon there was a whole collection of illnesses that could be classified under the broad label of 'female maladies'. This ambiguous category reveals how patriarchal conventions were translated into medicine to maintain the status quo that kept women on the margins — if not completely excluded from — participation in social, political and economic life.

Ellen Glasgow's thorough dissection of Victorian social mores in the Virginia of the fin de siècle succeeded in portraying the wrongs of women not only in the South of the United States but in the Western world in general. As Blair Rouse quotes from a review of *World's Work*, Ellen Glasgow was not " a 'Southern' writer or a 'Northern' writer, but a writer of human life as it develops itself everywhere under the conditions that her stories naturally find."[171] As a young writer growing up in Victorian America and educated in the genteel tradition of the Old South, Glasgow had first-hand knowledge of the tragedy of woman condemned to a life completely devoid of physical or intellectual stimulus and deprived of the moral and emotional support of other women.

In a period when serious literature was synonymous with literature written by males, Ellen Glasgow faced the opposition of publishing houses unwilling to accept manuscripts from young women writers. Her desire to inhabit a literary world dominated by men, together with her rejection of an ideal of womanhood that had made the lives of her mother and her sister Cary so unhappy, gradually drove Glasgow to distancing herself from the world of female connections that had shaped her childhood.

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[171] *World's Work*, V (November, 1902), 2791. Quoted by Blair Rouse in *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962) 131-132.

After the end of her affair with Gerald B—, the failure of her long engagement with Henry Anderson, and already in her fifties, Glasgow came to realise that 'the holy state of wedlock' would prove imprisoning and ultimately suffocating. Instead, her lifelong relationships with friends such as Elizabeth Patterson, Caroline Coleman Duke or Louise Collier Wilcox, together with the close companionship of Anne Virginia Bennett for more than thirty years provided a much more fulfilling and less threatening environment to Glasgow's adult life. As Linda Wagner-Martin asserts,

> it was the friendship of these devoted women relatives and friends that brought Glasgow to see how central to her life — to all women's lives — same-sex friendships were. As early as her 1913 novel, *Virginia*, she says of Virginia Pendleton and Susan Treadwell's love for each other, in phrases reminiscent of Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's findings: "they were intimate with that full and perfect intimacy which exists only between women who trust each other. (*V*, 517) [172]

Glasgow's own (possibly inherited) frail health, together with the lives of her mother and other women she knew, left a legacy of strength in female companionship but also reminded her of the debilitating effects of normative womanhood. By re-writing the stories of the women she had known and from whom she had learnt to cherish a world of all-female bonds of affection, Glasgow voiced the silent *her*stories of love and suffering that *his*tory had either unconsciously ignored or wilfully suppressed. In the fiction discussed in this dissertation, Glasgow most probably found her inspiration in the stories of those women who had filled her childhood world and shaped her adult self in many ways. In her characters, the reader can recognise fragments of Glasgow's closest female relatives, as well as many aspects of the author herself. To my

[172] Linda Wagner-Martin, 'Glasgow's Time in *The Sheltered Life*', in *Ellen Glasgow: New Perspectives,* Dorothy M. Scura, ed. (Knoxville: the University of Tennessee Press, 1995) 196.

mind, the protagonists and their different relationship to the cult of invalidism provide partial portraits of its creator, whose successful life was haunted by physical invalidism and threatened by patriarchal invalidation. As Julius Rowan Raper argues, "the characters that Glasgow created out of the shadow of her personality . . . are far more compelling . . . [they] succeed especially when they complement dramatically rounded characters."[173]

The women of Glasgow's fiction (and some of the women in her life) were victimised by the cult to womanly women, which in many cases impaired their physical health irreparably and in all cases suppressed their desires and aspirations. Glasgow's exquisite products of that principle are generally betrayed by self-centred males who only love their own power reflected in their wives' helplessness, or by philanderers who simply abandon them to pluck another fresh flower. Some of her female characters manage to manipulate their weakness to exert a cruel tyranny over their relatives, but their fate is no better. As Raper contends, "what Glasgow's men want generally costs women a good deal . . . [they] seek the static ideal of beauty and motherly chastity. And this proves perhaps the most pernicious need of all, for it denies the women in whom they invest their ideal the freedom to grow."[174]

The female invalid, languidly (and somehow seductively) lying in her bed in a white silk nightgown constituted, as this dissertation has attempted to illustrate, one of the most powerful symbols of True Womanhood which, as previous sections have

[173] Julius Rowan Raper, *From the Sunken Garden: the Fiction of Ellen Glasgow, 1916-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) 205.
[174] Ibid., 197.

mentioned, pervaded literature and representational arts.[175] Surrounded by such debilitating images of ideal femininity, women longed for and even consciously provoked disease in order to become a pathetic and diffuse version of a female that would satisfy the male gaze. The figure of the female invalid served Glasgow as an extreme and visually striking representation of women's situation of absolute dependence and powerlessness. It is my belief that Glasgow employed it as a metaphor to reveal the sick (and sickening) aspects of Victorian culture which, to my mind, she regards as the actual cause of women's *dis*-ease. As Diane Price Herndl observes on the opening page of *Invalid Women*, the term 'invalid' does not necessarily apply exclusively to ill women but operates as a symbol of women's position within patriarchy:

> 'Invalid' . . . carries traces of its etymology and suggests the not-valid. Invalidism is therefore the term that best describes the cultural definition of women in the nineteenth century (and perhaps in the twentieth) and the ill woman's relation to power and her culture. But it also describes the historical status accorded to ill women's (and maybe all women's) desires: not valid. [176]

As I have attempted to illustrate in the preceding chapters, Glasgow's female characters do not always correspond to this image of femininity. On the contrary, her treatment of female characters within patriarchal standards reveals a much more

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[175] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 29. In his profound and detailed study, Dijkstra points at the aesthetic and erotic connotations of female invalidism in the Victorian period and the fin-de-siècle: "Many [women], realizing that a consumptive look in women was thought to be evidence of a saintly disposition, began to cultivate that look of tubercular virtue by starving themselves . . . the psychological antecedents of our twentieth-century disease of anorexia nervosa . . . are to be found in the fad of sublime tubercular emaciation which, as we have seen, began to take on epidemic proportions in the 1860s and has continued to serve as a model of what is considered 'truly feminine.'"

[176] Diane Price Herndl, *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940* (Chapel Hill and London: the University of North Carolina Press, 1993) 1.

complex relationship with the cult of invalidism. In fact, in the novels discussed, only Angelica Blackburn, Rose Emily Pedlar, and Eva Birdsong are really struck by disease. However, all the female characters that most conform to this cultural ideal (Virginia Pendleton, Geneva Greylock, Eudora Oakley, and Stanley Timberlake, to name but a few of them) are diminished into artificial models of womanliness: this loss of self arrests their development into mature womanhood and ultimately destroys them. To illustrate that complexity, both the Southern ladies (like Virginia Pendleton or Eva Birdsong) and the New Women (like Caroline Meade, Dorinda Oakley or Roy Timberlake) are surrounded by mirror images that act as opposites or doubles, emphasising both their strengths and weaknesses.

Glasgow's early novels, although classified as minor works, reveal the author's increasing interest in the plight of woman and the devastating consequences of the Victorian cult of invalidism. In *The Wheel of Life*, the female characters that surround the poet-protagonist Laura Wilde evidence the potential evils of conventional heterosexual relationships. Through the failed marriage of Gerty Bridewell and the self-destruction of Connie Adams, Glasgow reveals the debilitating effects those patriarchal notions of femininity cause in the women who conform to them. The loss of self that marriage entails is contrasted with the affectionate friendship between Laura and Gerty, thus indicating Glasgow's move towards female bonding as a more fulfilling alternative to romance. In addition, Laura's invalid aunt Angela illustrates the empowering possibilities (and the destructive implications) of women's use of the cult of invalidism to their own advantage. With Angela Wilde, Glasgow inaugurates the series of

tyrannical though pitiable 'Angel(a)s' she would portray in many of her subsequent works of fiction. *The Ancient Law*, although it features a male protagonist, also offers an interesting contrast between the self-assertive Emily Brooke and the cold, beautiful, and helpless Lydia Ordway.

In *The Miller of Old Church*, Glasgow created one of her most striking examples of the abominations the cult of invalidism creates. As a contrast to the independent and unconventional protagonist Molly Merryweather, Angela Gay's beauty and extreme delicacy symbolise the ideal of Victorian femininity she embodies to perfection. Her lovely helplessness conceals a selfish being who rules and destroys through weakness, but Glasgow also uncovers the fact that Angela has purchased that privilege at the costly price of her integrity of self. Besides the outstanding figure of Mrs. Gay, the novel presents a series of female characters who are victimised by Victorian standards of femininity in various ways. Through the minor figures of Kesiah Blount, Blossom Revercomb, and Judy Hatch Revercomb, Glasgow offers different examples of patriarchal invalidation of female desires and aspirations. Together with the ghostly but ever-present shadow of Janet Merryweather, these characters help to emphasise Molly's assertiveness, as well as providing her with cautionary images of the self she could become if she acquiesced to those principles. Indeed, Molly's constant awareness of her mother's tragic ending is an early instance of Glasgow's lifelong endeavour to recover *her*stories as a vehicle for women's empowerment both within and beyond the domestic.

In *Virginia*, all the invalid (or invalidated) minor female characters around the young Virginia Pendleton constitute a warning and a foresight of her future. However, she never seems to comprehend the bleakness and futility of these women's lives, and

instead views them as positive role models. Glasgow thus highlights the limited chances of escape available to a woman educated in intellectual shallowness and blind adherence to the ideal of the womanly woman. Although Virginia Pendleton is not physically an invalid, images of illness pervade her married years. In contrast, her less lovely but more intelligent friend Susan Treadwell manages to combine a happy marriage with a successful life in the public sphere. Their lifelong friendship and mutual affection provides Virginia's only truly fulfilling relationship, since her selfless devotion to parents, husband and children has only impaired her integrity and her self-esteem. At the end of the novel, Virginia is incapable of finding a meaning to her existence without Oliver and the children, since her tragedy has been precisely not to experience life except as an inactive, almost inert shadow of her husband.

Glasgow always felt herself to be a "born novelist."[177] She felt most at ease with the structure and length of the novel, which allowed her to fully develop her story and give a consistent shape to her characters, although I believe her short fiction also deserves special attention. Critics during and after Glasgow's time, however, have disregarded her short stories as unimportant as compared to her main works of fiction. For instance, Marion Richards posits that

> [a]side from the intolerant attitude towards the "alienist" who treats the martyred Mrs. Maradick, there is nothing of interest in the story . . . They [Glasgow's short stories] are generally unsuccessful, since it is the development of character and social background rather than the effectiveness of plot that is Miss Glasgow's forte.[178]

[177] As Glasgow repeatedly states in her autobiography and her book of prefaces, both her personal aspiration and her natural tendency was that of becoming a novelist. See, for example, *CM*, 192. See also *LL*, 211: letter to J. Donald Adams (Richmond, April 28, 1936).
[178] Marion K. Richards, *Ellen Glasgow's Development as a Novelist* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971) 151-152.

Despite Marion Richards' negative assessment of Glasgow's short fiction, which she briefly analyses in some nine pages of her book *Ellen Glasgow's Development as a Novelist*, this dissertation has attempted to prove the importance of Glasgow's stories as a guideline to the major themes in her best works. Through her short stories, especially the Gothic ones, she gave a new dimension to the concept of "woman's traditions", since she embraced those traditions not as male-defined but as the women in her life had understood them. Simultaneously, she would experiment with male and female prototypes that would subsequently become her best-known characters. For example, terrified Mrs. Maradick in "The Shadowy Third" or disillusioned Margaret Fleming in "The Difference" seem to be first drafts for fully developed victimised belles like Eva Birdsong. In turn, characters like John Estbridge in "The Professional Instinct" or George Fleming in "The Difference" clearly provide sketches for more intense younger brothers like Jason Greylock in *Barren Ground* or George Birdsong in *The Sheltered Life*.

> After the memorable portrait of Angela Gay, *The Builders* presents one of Glasgow's most consciously evil 'Angel(a)s' in the character of Angelica Blackburn, whose lovely looks cover a malicious and deceitful disposition. As a striking mirror image of the independent protagonist Caroline Meade, her stunning beauty and her appearance of helpless victimisation incarnate the ideal of the frail and selfless invalid that proves so alluring to the male gaze. While Caroline is completely devoted to Angelica, the latter cannot but regard her employee as a rival, since patriarchal standards view

> relationships between women only in terms of competition over a man's attention. Along with her remarkable portrait of Angelica, one of the novel's fortes is Glasgow's strong emphasis on female bonding and its potential for change. Angelica's complete internalisation of the cult of True Womanhood renders her unable to become conscious of the emotional fulfilment and the empowering possibilities that Caroline's friendship could offer to both. Again, Glasgow warns that Angelica's pseudo-invalidism, which allows her to manipulate and tyrannise over those around her, is also the primary cause of her own self-destruction.

In *Barren Ground*, the small society around the brave and vigorous Dorinda Oakley is completely pervaded with illness and invalidism. All the minor female characters emphasise the heroine's strength and her success in escaping the bleak future that would have awaited her, had she not struggled against it. Even Jason Greylock, the man who betrays Dorinda, becomes an invalid (and is effectively invalidated) as a result of his inability to defy patriarchal conventions. Because of his moral weakness, Jason cannot confront his father and abandons his aspirations in New York to fulfil his duty as a son. Similarly, he surrenders to the pressure of the Ellgood men and marries Geneva Ellgood against his will. His imprisonment (literal as well as metaphorical) in the father's house proves as destructive for him as for any woman: he becomes an alcoholic and loses his property, ending an invalid in a charity home. Dorinda agrees to take care of him until he finally dies of tuberculosis. Glasgow's fiction seems to suggest that any man or

woman defined by Victorian standards as 'feminine' — that is, weak and powerless — will face victimisation and utter self-destruction. A parallel in Glasgow's own experience can be found in Glasgow's brother-in-law Walter McCormack's and her brother Frank's lack of a 'proper' masculinity, which ultimately pushed them to committing suicide. Hence, evidence within and outside of Glasgow's fiction reveals how invalidism is equated with the feminine condition, translating a character's personality and individual aspirations as 'not-valid.'

In *The Sheltered Life* Glasgow offers her gloomiest vision of the cult of invalidism, since there is not one single female character that escapes the debilitating effects of this suffocating shelter. The only possibility of a more fulfilling womanhood in the novel seems to reside in the young Jenny Blair, to whom Eva Birdsong confesses the failure her life has been in a desperate attempt to articulate her experience. Through her narrative, Eva endeavours to come to terms with the artificial self she has embodied for so long, while she also hopes that her knowledge will serve as a warning to Jenny Blair. However, Jenny Blair's upbringing has conditioned her to view her Aunt Etta's frustrating life of spinsterhood and invalidism as the worst of tragedies, so she takes Eva as the model of feminine perfection she would like to emulate and her married life as the epitome of happiness. Predictably, instead of being warned by Eva's plight, Jenny Blair is driven to commit the same errors. She is incapable of discerning that Etta's and Eva's neuroses are really the consequence of the same man-made ideal of femininity she, too, has been socialised into believing. The bitter wisdom of Eva's story offers her the more empowering option of female bonding, but instead Jenny Blair allies herself with George, the man who has destroyed her friend's integrity and self-esteem. Women's

disempowerment under patriarchy is patent in the final scene in the novel. The significance of Jenny Blair's betrayal is never revealed and Eva's act of violence is defined by General Archbald as an accident, and thus its potential consequences are eliminated, invalidated.

In This Our Life was written after a long struggle against illness, when Glasgow's increasing ill health and long periods of convalescence made its completion a painful process. The author's own condition as an invalid, as well as her desire to articulate her concerns about the patriarchal invalidation of women, are perhaps more evident in this novel than ever before in her fiction. The narrative is pervaded with an omnipresent atmosphere of sickness, presided by the perfidious invalid figure of Lavinia Timberlake, the last of Glasgow's tyrannical 'Angel(a)s'. Aside from the courageous female protagonist Roy Timberlake, the other female characters in the novel are (either conscious or unconscious) products of the cult of invalidism. Roy's beautiful and spoilt sister Stanley embodies the prototype of the selfish (and selfless) sex toy, whose beauty affords her immunity to act recklessly but also deprives her of maturity and autonomy. Similarly, their aunt Charlotte has been forced to smother her potential talents and adopt a docile image of femininity that pleases her husband, the utterly repulsive tycoon William Fitzroy. Even Roy's father Asa finds his aspirations invalidated by the almost sinister presence of *dis*-ease that permeates the Timberlake household. Lavinia's sick and sickening aura provides one of Glasgow's most outstanding examples of the pathetic beings True Womanhood makes of women. Despite her wickedness and the pernicious influence she exerts over her family, Lavinia is above all the victim of the same standards that have conferred her the power to manipulate others through

weakness. Her compliance to the masculine ideal of the sublime consumptive requires the elimination of the woman she could have been and is thus, above all, the cause of her total disempowerment and the root of her *dis*-ease.

Kathryn Lee Seidl remarks on the fact that Glasgow used "the long tradition of southern women writers, the mirror, to embody the vanity and self-destructiveness of southern women."[179] Seidl's assertion constitutes an apt reflection for my conclusions, since this is certainly the case with Glasgow's "Angel(a)s". Angela Gay, Angelica Blackburn, and Lavinia Timberlake provide some of the best portraits of the selfish/selfless beings that patriarchy makes of women. However, and as this dissertation has attempted to demonstrate, not only Glasgow's tyrannical invalids are victimised by Victorian ideals. Blossom Revercomb, Lucy and Virginia Pendleton, Belinda Treadwell, Geneva Ellgood, Jenny Blair Archbald, Eva Birdsong, and Stanley Timberlake (among many others) seem to voice the same message: all those women who mirror themselves in traditional standards of femininity are doomed to lose their individuality and become a mere reflection of the male ideal.

Significantly, Seidl goes on to argue that "[m]ost of the Glasgow mothers have some sort of psychosomatic illness; if they do not have beauty to attract attention, illness becomes the substitute."[180] Indeed, Southern male ideals regard lack of beauty in a woman as a tragedy, and women educated in those principles are socialised into viewing themselves as redundant and almost unnatural. Etta Archbald, for example, resorts to neuralgia to compensate for the sense of inadequacy her unattractiveness has caused her,

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[179] Kathryn Lee Seidl, 'Gail Godwin and Ellen Glasgow: Southern Mothers and Daughters', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (Autumn, 1991), pp. 293.
[180] Ibid., 293.

but this is not always the case in Glasgow's fiction. In contrast, Kesiah Blount has slaved for her lovely invalid sister Angela: her plainness has forced her to sacrifice her artistic ambitions to a life of drudgery and utter invisibility. Similarly, Eudora Oakley's neuralgia is not an attempt to attract attention, but the result of her frustrated missionary ambitions. In all cases, and as I have contended in the previous chapters, female illness and invalidism is a symptom of women's *dis*-ease within patriarchal strictures.

As I believe this dissertation has illustrated, the works discussed reflect Glasgow's peculiar relationship with illness and invalidism: her novels, her non-fiction works and her autobiography offer complementary and often contradictory views of the author. As Will Brantley notes, Glasgow felt her life and her art to be inextricably related, and hence her craft acted both as a springboard to explain her views of the world and as a means to understand her own self: "linked to her need for self-affirmation is Glasgow's need to unmask herself, to revise an image she had created for others, and perhaps for herself."[181] While she struggled to escape her Victorian upbringing and become a respected artist, she could not and would not abandon the network of female affiliations that proved crucial to her personal and professional life. Besides, her personal battle with deafness, migraines, nervous disorders, and a weak heart, as well as the experiences of many women she knew and loved, shaped her views on invalidism. To my mind, the icon of the female invalid enabled Glasgow to expose the debilitating effects of a system that suffocates women's personality and aspirations until they become faint versions of a human being, ineffectual, invisible and inexistent: not-valid.

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[181] Will Brantley, *Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir: Smith, Glasgow, Welty, Hellmann, Porter, and Hurston* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1993) 110.

Glasgow died on November 21, 1945, and was buried in Hollywood Cemetery, Richmond.[182] Her coffin also contained the remains of her favourite dog Jeremy. She died, as she had lived, beyond convention. According to Goodman's biography, Glasgow had written the following instructions to Bennett and her sister Rebe: "Do not forget Jeremy. Remind Dr. Tompkins of his promise." It seems that, upon his arrival, Tompkins "administered what would have been a fatal dosage of strychnine to Glasgow", since she "had no intention of being buried — like Madeline Usher — alive."[183] These instructions seem to culminate her unfailing struggle against illness in her personal life, as well as her equally constant denunciation of the cult of invalidism in her fiction, which symbolically buried women alive. As Raper aptly summarises,

> the powers we discover through characters in a book are our own . . . Such is the often forgotten language of fiction, this simple magic by which we see ourselves in a mirror of words that at some point cease to be words and become people — people who are, at first, someone else walking around inside our head — and, finally, only our selves.[184]

Both in her life and in her fiction, Glasgow tried to give shape to her ideas about life, literature, love, and friendship as she understood them. Quoting Glasgow's phrase, in a certain measure, I have also found myself pouring my own feelings and discovering

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[182] According to the data provided by Susan Goodman, Glasgow had signed her will the year before, on April 15, 1944. As one could expect, Glasgow did not forget the female relatives and friends who had filled her life. Her sister Rebe, lifelong friends like Caroline Duke among others, and of course animals were generously remembered. Predictably, her main thoughts were for her faithful companion Anne Virginia Bennett, "who succeeded Glasgow as president of the SPCA, and the SPCA itself . . . Glasgow left Bennett a life interest in a trust fund of $100,000 . . . following Bennett's death, the income from the trust reverted to the Richmond Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in memory of Glasgow's dog Jeremy. Although Arthur owned One West Main, Bennett could live there as long as she chose . . . all her papers were to go to her literary executors, Irita Van Doren and Frank Morley." See Susan Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 246.

[183] Ibid., 249-250.

[184] Raper, *From the Sunken Garden*, 207.

myself in the process of writing this dissertation. Therefore, I believe it is appropriate to finish it with the last sentence of her book of prefaces, which must have been one of her last reflections upon herself and her literary work: “We find, in a certain measure, what we have to give, if not what we seek, both in the external world about us and in the more solitary life of the mind.” (*CM*, 264) Ellen Glasgow lived, still lives through her fiction, and will forever live in my mind, beyond illness, decay and death; beyond frontiers, beyond convention, beyond defeat.

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■ Appendix: Complete Chronological List of Ellen Glasgow's Works (first editions).

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