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*Ellen Through the Looking-Glass:  
Female Invalidism as Metaphor in the  
Fiction of Ellen Glasgow.*

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*To the Radiant Spirit of Light  
Who Is my Mother  
Sílvia Rué Rué*

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Frailty, Thy Name  
Is Woman.

*Hamlet*, Act I, Scene II

# Index

□ <b>List of Abbreviations.</b>	6
<b>1. Introduction.</b>	7-22
<b>2. Ellen Glasgow: in Fiction and in Fact.</b>	23-41
<b>3. Ellen Glasgow in Context.</b>	
<b>3.1.</b> A Brief Background to Post-Bellum Virginia and the Southern States.	41-54
<b>3.2.</b> The Social Situation of Women in the South at the fin de siècle.	55-63
<b>4. 'The Female Malady': Victorian Assumptions on Femininity and the Cult of Invalidism.</b>	63-84
<b>5. Ellen Through the Looking-Glass: the female invalid as metaphor in some of Glasgow's works of fiction.</b>	
<b>5.1.</b> First Impressions: <i>The Wheel of Life</i> (1906), <i>The Ancient Law</i> (1908) and <i>The Miller of Old Church</i> (1911).	85-114
<b>5.2.</b> Woman as Ideal: <i>Virginia</i> (1913).	115-137
<b>5.3.</b> Experiments: the Short Stories (1916-1924).	135-137
5.3.1 Gothic Stories	137-173
5.3.2 Marriage Stories	210-233
<b>5.4.</b> Fighting with the 'Angel(a)s': <i>The Builders</i> (1919).	234-262
<b>5.5.</b> The New Woman: <i>Barren Ground</i> (1925).	262-280
<b>5.6.</b> The End of a Legend: <i>The Sheltered Life</i> (1932).	280-300
<b>5.7.</b> Beyond <i>Dis-ease: In This Our Life</i> (1941) and <i>Beyond Defeat</i> (1966).	301-316
<b>6. Conclusions.</b>	317-324
<b>7. Works Cited.</b>	325-326
□ <b>Appendix:</b> Complete Chronological List of Ellen Glasgow's Works (first editions).	319-320

## ■ List of Abbreviations.

- BG* Glasgow, Ellen. *Barren Ground*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957.
- CM* Glasgow, Ellen. *A Certain Measure. An Interpretation of Prose Fiction*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1943.
- CSS* Glasgow, Ellen. *The Collected Stories of Ellen Glasgow*, Richard K. Meeker, ed. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1963.
- ITOL* Glasgow, Ellen. *In This Our Life*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941.
- LL* Glasgow, Ellen. *Letters of Ellen Glasgow*, Blair Rouse, ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1958.
- TB* Glasgow, Ellen. *The Builders*. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1919.
- TMOC* Glasgow, Ellen. *The Miller of Old Church*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1911.
- TSL* Glasgow, Ellen. *The Sheltered Life*. New York: Harvest/HBJ, 1985.
- TWOL* Glasgow, Ellen. *The Wheel of Life*. New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1906.
- V* Glasgow, Ellen. *Virginia*. New York: Penguin, 1989.
- WW* Glasgow, Ellen. *The Woman Within*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1980.

# 1. Introduction.

*The invalid, defined by her body and her weakness, represents an exaggeration of one of the "natural" definitions of all women.<sup>1</sup>*

The Victorian period and the ideology of separate spheres placed upper- and middle-class women on a pedestal of purity and piety, appointing them as spiritual guardians of the home and barring education or professional life as improper and deviant. Confinement within the domestic, together with lack of physical exercise or mentally stimulating activities, could lead to frustration and even physical and mental insanity.<sup>2</sup> The ideal of True Womanhood and its adjoining values of dependence, submission, spirituality and delicacy — so convenient for male comfort and the maintenance of patriarchal hegemony — denied women control over their own physical, emotional and intellectual needs, and placed the woman writer in an extremely difficult position. Torn between their artistic ambitions and the roles that family and society expected of them, writers like Edith Wharton or Charlotte Perkins Gilman had to undergo a painful process to overcome invalidism and illness, and gain professional independence and self-realisation.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Showalter thoroughly discusses this issue in chapter 2 of her book *The Female Malady*. For further reading on this subject, see Showalter's 'The Rise of the Victorian Madwoman', in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago Press, 1987) 51-74.

According to several feminist scholars, medical practitioners of the period sanctioned social and religious views that saw women as fragile, intellectually inferior and prone to nervousness.<sup>3</sup> Doctors argued that physiology determined women's place in society: as Helen Small contends, physicians tended to draw "on a long medical tradition of viewing the physiology of women as cripplingly vulnerable to their emotional state."<sup>4</sup> Women were thought to be dominated by their reproductive cycles, and young girls were warned against wasting their energies in the pursuit of any activity (such as studying or exercising) that could impair the correct development of their reproductive organs. Any deviation from their natural functions, they threatened, could lead to painful illnesses, mental derangement, even cancer or death. Hence, social mores, medical theories and religious predicaments supported one another in the designation of marriage and motherhood as women's 'natural' and divinely appointed roles, and of invalidism as women's natural condition. As Ornella Moscucci aptly notes,

woman was, by definition, disease or disorder, a deviation from the standard of health represented by the male . . . Not only did woman's biological functions blur into disease; they were also the source of a host of psychological disorders, from strange moods and feelings, to hysteria and insanity . . . These assumptions — that woman's physical and mental peculiarities derive from her reproductive function and that pathology defines the norm of the female body — legitimated the medical supervision of women.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For a thorough analysis of this issue see, for example, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English, *Complaints and Disorders: The Sexual Politics of Sickness* (Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1973), or Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> Helen Small, *Love's Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) 15.

<sup>5</sup> Ornella Moscucci, *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 102.



Invalidism as a symbol of women's powerless position in Victorian England and America and women's struggle for self-definition in a patriarchal society are crucial to an understanding of the literary production of the Virginia writer Ellen Glasgow (1873-1945), born to become a Southern Belle and educated in the tradition of the 'womanly woman'. Publishing her first novel, *The Descendant*, when she was only twenty-four, Glasgow began a literary career that comprised nineteen novels, a collection of poems, a collection of stories and a book of literary criticism. Her autobiography, *The Woman Within*, was published posthumously in 1954.

Ellen Glasgow's memories of childhood are always bound to a female world of close relationships inside and outside her family. She would always maintain these connections in her personal life, and female bonding was to become one of the main concerns in her works of fiction. Glasgow soon rejected the strict Calvinist morals and the shallow education her father imposed in the household and equipped herself with all the knowledge she could filch from her father's library. She widely read history, philosophy and politics, and clearly saw the evils of the "sheltered life" her parents had intended for her. As Elizabeth Gallup Myer contends in *The Social Situation of Women in the Novels of Ellen Glasgow*,

instead of retreating into the sheltered security of a comfortable home, Miss Glasgow bent a critical eye upon postbellum Virginia, and stated her opinions in print at intervals of forty-six years; she asserted in caustic or subtle or witty or sympathetic terms the plight of woman not only in Virginia but in the world.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Gallup Myer, *The Social Situation of Women in the Novels of Ellen Glasgow* (Hicksville: Exposition Press, 1978) 11.

In 1889, Glasgow began to have hearing problems: the fear of becoming completely deaf would be a constant threat with which she would have to struggle for the remainder of her life. Moreover, various members in her family suffered from nervous disorders she was afraid to have inherited. Having felt the isolation and confinement of the invalid due to her migraine headaches and frequent bouts of depression, and understanding her mother's self-effacement as the direct cause of her self-destruction, Glasgow soon rebelled against conventional codes of behaviour and looked for self-definition in a male-defined world. Her quest for an independent selfhood unconsciously distanced her from the network of female connections that had surrounded her since childhood, and isolated her from the support of women who would later become crucial to her development as a woman and as an artist. In spite of her mother's weak health, she gathered strength to write about four hundred pages of her first novel, *Sharp Realities*, between 1890 and 1891. With the help of her sister Cary, she went to New York in order to find a publisher, where she was sexually harassed by a literary agent. The agent was an elderly man who "was not interested in the manuscripts of young women." After asking her a number of personal questions, he told her she was "too pretty to be a novelist" and asked whether her figure was "as lovely in the altogether as it is in your clothes?" (WW, 96-97) After this unnerving experience, Glasgow destroyed the manuscript.

After several frustrating experiences, her book was finally given attention and published anonymously by Harper in 1897. Most of the novels she would produce during the subsequent forty-six years of her literary life would become best sellers. Many of her works of fiction present young professional females who, like herself, find their careers hindered by conventions, often being forced to decide between their aspirations and the demands of family or male partners. Usually, female bonding is presented as a more rewarding (and healthier) alternative to conventional heterosexual relationships, especially within marriage.

As Glasgow's novels became more and more widely recognised in American letters, she received a number of honours from several institutions. At the same time, though, she developed a heart condition that was to restrict her social and professional life permanently. Her life had been a constant struggle against the crushing effects of illness and nervous breakdowns, and she had done great efforts to overcome the fear and shame of speaking in public or socialising with the help of a hearing aid. Ironically, invalidism struck her precisely when her value as a writer was finally being acknowledged and she could have enjoyed the literary recognition she always thought she deserved. In 1939 she received the degree of Doctor of Laws from the College of William and Mary, and her first heart attack occurred at the end of that year. The second severe heart attack came in 1940, when she was awarded the Howells Medal by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. She received the *Saturday Review of Literature* Award for Distinguished Service to American Literature in 1941.<sup>7</sup> *In This Our Life*

(1941) became another bestseller; it was released into a Hollywood film version and was awarded with the Pulitzer Prize in 1942. For the last few years, she continued to write in spite of her frail health. Ellen Glasgow died at her home in One West Main in 1945, at age seventy-two.

As many critics have noted, Glasgow pioneered in distancing the Southern novel from its tradition of antebellum nostalgia and succeeded in drawing a realistic portrait of her native state. For example, Louis Auchincloss remarks that her fiction was “the necessary bridge between the world of Thomas Nelson Page and the world of William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams.”<sup>8</sup> Luther Y. Gore also notes that, despite her dislike for Faulkner and other more modern Southern writers, Glasgow voiced the need to depart from the tradition of sentimentalism:

Miss Glasgow's strictures on modern naturalistic writers . . . were not a result of conservatism which developed as she became older, but rather a part of a basic critical attitude which remained essentially the same throughout her writing career. Her objection was always to superficial writing which pretended to be realistic. Viewed in this light, Miss Glasgow's later objections on Faulkner, Hemingway, Caldwell and Lewis, do not appear inconsistent.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See the chronology provided by Marcelle Thiebaut in *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982) xii-xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Louis Auchincloss, *Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965) 91. Blair Rouse also shares this opinion. See Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962) 141.

<sup>9</sup> Luther Y. Gore, "'Literary Realism or Nominalism' by Ellen Glasgow: An Unpublished Essay", in *American Literature*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (March 1962) 72.

As Gore infers from Glasgow's words in his edition of her unpublished essay "Literary Realism or Nominalism", her praise or her criticism of Southern authors is not simply the product of an embittered old age, as some critics have stated. Rather, it reflects that "Miss Glasgow had worked assiduously to familiarize herself with modern Southern literature" in order to "give recognition to those writers who were furthering the cause of literature in the South."<sup>10</sup> For example, in this essay Glasgow describes Booth Tarkington's *Alice Adams* as "what all realistic fiction aspires to be — a vivid experience seen more clearly and more intensely in art as we should ever have seen it in the actual world that surrounds us."<sup>11</sup> Although Glasgow's fiction does not possess the bluntness with which authors like Faulkner expose the decadence and degradation of the South, her message is not less plain or powerful.

Glasgow wrote the bulk of her novels in the first three decades of the twentieth century, but she had been educated in Victorian morals. The slaveholding past and the nostalgia for the lost glamour of *cavaliers* and Belles caused post-bellum Virginia to linger in Victorian traditions, remaining especially strict in matters regarding feminine behaviour. This is why my analysis of female illness and invalidism as a metaphor of the feminine condition will be carried out within the context of the Victorian cult of invalidism in England and America, and will be related to the image of the invalid woman as an icon of extreme (and somehow desirable)

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 78.

manifestation of male definitions of the feminine. As Susan Sontag argues in *Illness as Metaphor*, the romantic idea that having tuberculosis was alluring and thought to “confer extraordinary powers of seduction” was inherited by the Victorians. Especially in women, an appearance of consumption “became a staple of nineteenth century manners . . . it was glamorous to look sickly.”<sup>12</sup>

It is not strange that some women courted disease in order to appear more attractive to male eyes and to show their capacity for a Christian endurance of pain. At the same time, invalidism provided undervalued and overworked women with an opportunity to monopolise the attention and care they were expected to provide to their families but not to receive themselves, as well as effecting a liberation from exhausting household duties and the sexual demands of their husbands. Thus, illness became a socially accepted alternative to achieve power that would have been considered totally unacceptable in a healthy woman. These extremely delicate and rather pathetic ideals did not correspond to women’s vision of themselves but had to be accepted as true, since women were socialised into defining themselves through the male gaze.

Conditioned to believe the private as her proper space and the ‘domestic’ or the ‘popular’ as her proper literary genre, Glasgow strove to rebel against such notions and sought acceptance in the male-dominated world of public life and ‘serious’ literature. However, being a young woman writer in turn-of-century Richmond entailed a tension which would cost Glasgow years to reconcile, and which may have had an impact on her

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<sup>12</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (London, Penguin, 1983) 17, 33.

health. She felt torn between a private experience she could share with women she loved, but whose bleak and passive life she rejected, and a literary world made by and for men, which she both cherished and rebelled against. While she tried to distance herself from the excessively selfless existence of her mother and sister in order to assert her personal and artistic identity, she unconsciously defined female experience according to male standards.

At a time when codes of behaviour imposed delicacy and helpless dependence on women, Glasgow grew up in rejection of the Victorian ideal of True Womanhood and of its Southern version, that of the mythical Southern Belle. Glasgow was aware that the ideal of the ‘womanly woman’ and other constructed myths of femininity were projections of male fears and desires artificially forced upon women and assumed as ‘natural’. This perfect flower of ravishing beauty and selfless devotion to her divinely appointed duties of wife and mother served as ideal and inspiration to the Southern *cavalier*, who doubtlessly saw his own potential increased when reflected in such a frail creature.<sup>13</sup>

Glasgow’s novels show the irony (and the tragedy) that underlies these assumptions. In her fiction, the women who most approach the ideal of True Womanhood are either struck by illness or victimised and abandoned by those who formerly worshipped them. Angelica Blackburn in *The Builders* and Eva Birdsong in *The Sheltered Life*, for example, constitute the

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<sup>13</sup> The role of women as mirrors recalls Virginia Woolf’s famous quotation from *A Room of One’s Own*: “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size.” Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 45.

perfect embodiment of the womanly woman, and they are affected by a life-threatening disease. As I will contend in the next few chapters, women's adherence to that ideal is precisely the origin of their *dis(-)ease*.

Even though some of the women characters I will discuss presently are not physically affected by invalidism, my view is that Glasgow uses the cult of invalidism as a metaphor to reveal the mechanisms of patriarchy. To my mind, her novels warn against adhering to its values, since women are moulded to become paragons of extreme selflessness and are ultimately reduced to virtual inexistence. Many times physically debilitating, Glasgow seems to suggest, the doctrine of female self-immolation always smothers women's ambitions and desires, transforming them into mere shadows of themselves and condemning their emotional, psychological, sexual and intellectual needs as in-valid. Glasgow's periods of illness perhaps make this image more evident, since she probably sensed illness as a threat to everything she had achieved in the professional world. In fact, Glasgow spent her whole life both fighting her own condition as an invalid and denouncing the social mores that defined her philosophy of life as not-valid.<sup>14</sup>

In *Somatic Fictions*, Athena Vrettos contends that "both real and fictional nervous sufferers confronted the ambiguity of their illnesses through acts of narrative refiguration." Glasgow, like many other women writers, exorcised her own ill health in her writings, thus "symbolically transforming

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<sup>14</sup> I will refer to the pun on the words invalid and in-valid to distinguish between physical and metaphorical invalidism. To my mind, Glasgow views the effects of patriarchal strictures on women as invalidating: although they may or may not be inscribed on the female body, they nevertheless incapacitate women in virtually every sense.



[her] tenuous physical status into more concrete narrative forms.”<sup>15</sup> In the works of fiction this dissertation discusses, the female protagonist is surrounded by minor characters that function as opposite or mirror images. To my mind, their creation responds to an attempt to highlight the complexities and contradictions in the main character and in the author herself. To my mind, Glasgow saw herself as a complex “union of opposites” (WW, 16), an amalgamation of tradition and innovation. She looked for a way out of the system of values that had destroyed the lives of many women she loved, while she tried to maintain her emotional bonds with those same women. From this inherent contradiction she probably derived her need to write the different and conflictive sides of her self into different female characters.

The first part of this dissertation provides a brief background to the post-bellum South and situates Ellen Glasgow’s life and works within the context of her period. The second part is devoted to the analysis of invalidism, illness and madness in the context of Victorian and turn-of-century England and America, and to the creation of the invalid woman as an icon of femininity. The third part goes on to discuss some of Glasgow’s novels in order to explore her views on the figure of the female invalid, as well as the changing relationships among women from the fin de siècle to the first decades of the twentieth century.

The following sections attempt to examine some of Glasgow’s works of fiction: *The Wheel of Life* (1906), *The Ancient Law* (1908), *The Miller of*

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<sup>15</sup> Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995) 15-16.

*Old Church* (1911), *Virginia* (1913), *Barren Ground* (1925), *The Sheltered Life* (1932), *In This Our Life* (1941) and *Beyond Defeat* (1966). My analysis will focus on attempting to show how the lives of Glasgow's female characters — in a clear parallel with her own experience and that of other women she knew — were shaped (and, in many cases, sapped) by the Victorian cult of female invalidism. Whether she created a passive and conventional Victorian wife like Virginia Pendleton in *Virginia*, a strong and iron-veined New Woman like Dorinda Oakley in *Barren Ground*, or a ravishing Belle like Eva Birdsong in *The Sheltered Life*, Glasgow was aware of the threatening aspects of the cult of invalidism, together with the empowering possibilities its acceptance or rejection could offer.<sup>16</sup> I have chosen these novels because of the special significance their female characters have as regards my analysis. Although there are many other novels and female characters that would provide interesting insights to this dissertation, I decided to choose some of the most representative and omit some others for the sake of clarity and brevity, and in order to avoid excessive restatement.

Glasgow's early novels portray independent female characters who find themselves torn between professional life and romance: for instance, Rachel Gavin is a painter in *The Descendant* (1897) and Mariana Musin is a singer in *Phases of an Inferior Planet* (1898). In *The Wheel of Life* (1906), Laura

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<sup>16</sup> Helen Small focuses on this paradox when she pertinently remarks that “hysteria is the woman's simultaneous acceptance and refusal of the organisation of sexuality under patriarchal capitalism. It is simultaneously what a woman can do to be feminine and to refuse femininity, within patriarchal discourse.” See Small, *Love's Madness*, 26.

Wilde is a poet suspended between her artistic career as a writer and her longing for passion. Her engagement with the unworthy Arnold Kemper proves a failure, while female affiliation is hinted as an alternative to the self-annihilation domesticity entails. Intellectual Laura has spent her unmarried years in a country house with her bachelor uncle and her eccentric aunt Angela, whose condition as an invalid has enabled her to enjoy a series of prerogatives that she could have never had as a healthy woman.

Aunt Angela inaugurates Glasgow's gallery of selfish invalids, who exert a sinister influence over those around them and tyrannise the household under a pretence of loveliness and delicacy. Of Glasgow's subsequent "Angel(a)s" (Angela Gay in *The Miller of Old Church*, Lydia Ordway in *The Ancient Law*, Angelica Blackburn in *The Builders*, and Lavinia Timberlake in *In This Our Life*), Mrs Gay is the most consciously wicked of them, together with Lavinia. They provide an illustrative picture of how the cult of invalidism dehumanises and reduces women to artificial versions of a human being, and that is the reason why I have included these novels in my analysis. The purpose of this dissertation, however, is not to concentrate only on women with actual physical limitations, but to analyse the debilitating effects of the cult of invalidism as they affect 'normal' women. Hence, I have chosen to discuss other examples of Glasgow's fiction which do not feature invalid women but which effectively portray the author's views on this subject.

By the time Glasgow wrote *Virginia*, she had envisioned a way of reconciling her personal and professional ambitions with a common

experience that would re-unite her with past and present generations of women. Sisterly bonds of affection and understanding, like the ones she maintained with her lifelong friend Caroline Coleman or her secretary and nurse Anne Virginia Bennett, proved to Glasgow more enriching and less threatening than normative male-female relationships, to the point of eschewing marriage after a long engagement to Henry Anderson. By recovering the female network of close relationships of her childhood world and constructing a female self without the cultural values that constricted woman to the roles of wife and mother, Glasgow succeeded in re-creating her own self while blending it with the stories of women that had so long been silenced. The author would fully develop this newly discovered philosophy of life in what is generally considered her best novel, *Barren Ground* (1925).

Glasgow's short fiction (1916-1924) offers a valuable insight into her major themes, which she was to develop in subsequent works such as *Barren Ground* and the trilogy that includes *The Sheltered Life* (1932). In her short stories, Glasgow gives vent to personal views on traditional notions of womanhood and experiments with male and female prototypes that would become sketches for her best-known characters. *Barren Ground* is a celebration of the values of the New Woman, who manages to overcome a failed romance and succeeds in achieving economic independence and self-realisation without male help. *The Sheltered Life* and *In This Our Life*, however, offer a much bleaker version of women's position in society. As late as 1941, approaching her seventies and continually haunted by weak health, Glasgow still seemed to feel the debilitating influence of Victorian

constructs of femininity. *Beyond Defeat*<sup>17</sup> is indeed an apt title for Glasgow's last novel. Surprisingly, the sequel to *In This Our Life*, which Glasgow wrote at intervals during the last years of her life while suffering from serious health problems, finally portrays a female world of communal affection and support in which both men and women can be freed from the sickening constraints of patriarchy.

Glasgow's fiction thus offers a valuable insight into the cult of female invalidism, which she attacks in novels other than those this dissertation attempts to deal with. Most of Glasgow's fiction features female invalids and, most significantly as regards my analysis, it is pervaded by invalidated women. Self-sacrificing and helpless wives, frustrated spinsters, or independent professionals, Glasgow's women are threatened or victimised by self-centred male figures who can only idealise them as projections of their own selfish desires. In the novels discussed, the female characters usually rely on same-sex companionship for support and understanding. In contrast with the debilitating effects of marriage, female bonding proves of far greater benefit to the protagonists. However, only Dorinda Oakley in *Barren Ground* and Roy Timberlake in *In This Our Life* fully succeed in overcoming Victorian assumptions of femininity that define them as lacking, other, or *in*-valid. Athena Vrettos notes that "narratives of illness . . . could shape how people perceived relationships between mind and body, self and

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<sup>17</sup> Glasgow's last novel would not be published until twenty years after her death, perhaps because the author did not intend it for publication, or perhaps because her poor health made critics believe that the novel was not worth publishing. See Glasgow, *Beyond Defeat: An Epilogue to an Era*, Luther Y. Gore, ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1966).

other, private and public spheres.”<sup>18</sup> Through her *in*-valid characters, as I will presently argue, Glasgow both came to terms with her ill health and reshaped Victorian assumptions about what she perceived as a *dis*-eased female self.

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<sup>18</sup> Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions*, 2.

## 2. Ellen Glasgow: in Fiction and in Fact.

*I suppose I am a born  
novelist, for the things I  
imagine are more vital and  
vivid to me than the things I  
remember.*<sup>19</sup>

The outcome of the Civil War signified the victory of nationalism over regional interests. As the next section will explain in more detail, with the increasing move towards urbanisation and industrialisation following the war there was a developing nostalgia for remaining regional differences. Although the term “local color” can be applied to states all over the United States, Southern local colour had the special charm of the Lost Cause. There was an idealisation of the way things were before the war, often depicting the South as it had never been. Ellen Glasgow’s fellow Virginian Thomas Nelson Page (1853-1922) was partly to blame for this distorted vision, as he became a distinguished leader of the local-color movement. His first volume of stories, *In Ole Virginia* (1887), depicts romantic aspects of plantation life in the region before and during the Civil War, often using the black slaves’ dialect. His essays and social studies share his fiction’s theme and tone, such as *The Old South* (1892), *Social Life in Old*

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<sup>19</sup> *LL*, 211. Letter to J. Donald Adams (Richmond, April 28, 1936). See List of Abbreviations for a full reference of this collection, otherwise cited as *LL*.

*Virginia* (1897) and *The Old Dominion* (1908), which are generally concerned with sentimental views of the aristocratic Old South.

At the onset of the twentieth century, the Virginia-based novels of Ellen Glasgow offer a realistic example of regional writing that provides an alternative to the romantic stories of a glorified antebellum past in which noble and brave gentlemen and ravishingly beautiful ladies are depicted with nostalgia, while the horrors of slavery are conveniently forgotten. In her 1940 essay 'Regional Literature in the South', Ellen Glasgow's biographer Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings refers to Webster's dictionary for definitions of 'literature' and 'regional', and argues that "there is very little regional literature of the South." She goes on to advocate for a dissociation of the two words, since this label encourages the production of poor works of fiction only because regionalism is popular. Rawlings classifies Glasgow as "the creator of the only unmistakable regional literature of the South."<sup>20</sup> Ellen M. Caldwell similarly remarks on Glasgow's emphasis on the Virginia setting, and uses it to link Glasgow with the tradition of Southern Agrarians:

[i]n examining the defects of the Tidewater society, Glasgow was both a literary realist and a novelist of manners. But midway through her career, she became something in addition: she became an agrarian . . . In her later novels . . . the protagonists rely increasingly upon memories of an older rural or communal order to lend their lives dignity and purpose. This celebration of Southern values and tradition, though tempered by

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<sup>20</sup> Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, 'Regional Literature in the South', *College English*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (February, 1940), p. 382.



Glasgow's irony, linked her writing to a regional literary heritage.<sup>21</sup>

Caldwell aptly remarks on the fact that Glasgow plainly rejected the existing literary tradition of 'moonlight and magnolias', while she retained the Virginia setting and the close bonds to the land that characterise her most celebrated novels. However, in creating protagonists who find a meaning to their lives through their relationship with the rural landscape, I believe Glasgow was attempting to provide her own version of what Caldwell calls "the communal order." As Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings contends, the Virginia setting of her novels constitutes "an inextricable part of her work", although she also notes that Glasgow "is first an artist and then a Virginian."<sup>22</sup> Glasgow's intensely regional setting is contrasted with the universal quality of her fiction, which to my mind is made the richer by this contrast. As sections 5 and 7 will attempt to illustrate, female characters like Dorinda Oakley in *Barren Ground* or Kate Oliver in *In This Our Life* create new homes and successful lives for themselves precisely by subverting and (re)creating traditional definitions of home, family, and community. The lives of Virginia women and their attempts to survive within (or escape from) the constraints of patriarchy actually constitutes one of the

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<sup>21</sup> Ellen M. Caldwell, 'Ellen Glasgow and the Southern Agrarians', *American Literature*, Vol. 56, No. 2 (May, 1984), p. 203.

<sup>22</sup> Kinnan Rawlings, 'Regional Literature in the South', p. 386.

predominant subjects in Glasgow's works, as I will argue in subsequent sections.

Among her major themes, Glasgow explores the traditional concepts of womanhood that operated in the Virginia of the fin de siècle. In the preface to her novel *The Sheltered Life* (1932), Glasgow states that the "perpetual flight from reality" (CM, 203) that pervaded high society in nineteenth-century Virginia regarded women as ideals of beauty and innocence rather than as human beings.<sup>23</sup> In order to prepare them to fulfil this role, women underwent an unrealistic and unnaturally "sheltered" education, which ultimately excluded them from real life. For a woman bred under such a system, the chances to achieve economic independence, intellectual insight or even psychological and emotional maturity were almost inexistent.

Ellen Anderson Gholson Glasgow was born on the 22nd of April 1873 at 101 Cary Street, Richmond, Virginia, the eighth of ten children of Francis Thomas Glasgow and Anne Jane Gholson. Anne Gholson was a member of one of the aristocratic families of the old South, daughter of Judge William Yates Gholson and his first wife Martha Anne Jane Taylor, who died two weeks after she was born. In order to escape his sorrow, William Gholson moved to Cincinnati and left Anne and her brother in charge of their great-uncle Chancellor Creed Taylor, of Cumberland County, Virginia. When her mother

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<sup>23</sup> Critic Linda Wagner points at this issue in her analysis of Glasgow's fiction. See Linda W. Wagner, *Ellen Glasgow: Beyond Convention* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982) 86.

died, Anne was left in the keeping of Mammy Rhoda, whose descendants would be, since then, closely linked to the Glasgow family<sup>24</sup>.

In contrast to Anne Gholson's genteel origins — the author defined her mother as “a perfect flower of the Tidewater” — Ellen Glasgow's father was “Scottish in every nerve and sinew.” (WW, 298) Francis Thomas Glasgow was the son of Robert Glasgow and the grandson of Arthur Glasgow of Green Forest<sup>25</sup>, Rockbridge County, Virginia. After studying in Washington College and reading law in Richmond for two years, he became associated with the Tredegar Iron Works, an important plant that manufactured cannons for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Francis Glasgow and Anne Gholson married at Needham in 1853 and moved to Richmond after the Confederate defeat. For more than fifty years Francis Glasgow remained a managing director of the Tredegar Iron Works and an elder in the Presbyterian Church, imposing his severe Calvinist morals on his family. Glasgow always considered that her father was “one of the last men on earth she [Anne Gholson] should have married” (WW, 14). The author's dislike for her father is made patent in her autobiography: she blamed him for her mother's poor health and her brother Frank's gradual estrangement from the family:

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<sup>24</sup> Rhoda Kibble nursed all the Glasgow children until she died shortly after Ellen's brother Frank was born. A new nurse was found in Lizzie Jones, who would later on become Ellen Glasgow's beloved Mammy. Characters with the name of “Mammy Rhoda” or “Mammy Rhody” would repeatedly appear in Glasgow's fiction. See WW, 19.

<sup>25</sup> Green Forest, which now comprises Buena Vista, Balcony Falls and Glasgow, is the English translation for the Gaelic *glas gow* (WW, 300).

We were made of different clay, and I inherited nothing from him, except the color of my eyes and a share in a trust fund, which he had accumulated with infinite self-sacrifice. Everything in me, mental or physical, I owe to my mother; and it is possible that from that union of opposites I derived a perpetual conflict of types. (*WW*, 16)

Throughout her life, Glasgow maintained an ambiguous relationship with her father who, as a traditional patriarch of the Old South, always remained dictatorial and unaffectionate towards his children. Unlike the author, who adored animals, her father was hostile to them: in her autobiography, Glasgow recounts painful episodes of her childhood in which her father recklessly disposed of pets. As Will Brantley notes, her early identification with animals as helpless and inarticulate creatures anticipates her adult concern towards women as voiceless victims of patriarchy:

Glasgow conflates her sense of oppression and victimization with the experience of creatures who do not have her resources to articulate themselves. Animals solicit Glasgow's sympathy, but in another sense they reflect her fear of being misunderstood, of articulating herself in a society that has defined a place for her that she cannot accept, a society that is . . . hostile to its pets (animals or women) who outgrow their usefulness, or who, like Glasgow, never agreed to be useful in the first place — at least not in any socially sanctioned manner.<sup>26</sup>

Ellen Glasgow's first memories as a child recall the affection of her mother and her nurse Lizzie Jones: "My mother and my colored mammy bend over me. I have no words. I cannot tell

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<sup>26</sup> Will Brantley, *Feminine Sense in Southern Memoir: Smith, Glasgow, Welty, Hellmann, Porter, and Hurston* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi: 1993) 95.

them . . . I remember passing from arms to arms.” (WW, 4) Her first happy years of childhood are always bound to a female world of close relationships within and outside her family: her biological and her surrogate mother, her older sister Cary, her younger sister Rebe, and her two childhood friends with whom she would maintain a lifelong relationship, Caroline/Carrie Coleman (later Mrs. Caroline Duke) and Elizabeth/Lizzie Patterson:

The day when little Carrie Coleman was first brought over to play with us was the beginning of our most intimate friendship . . . As soon as Lizzie and I saw each other, the second strongest and deepest friendship of my life began. (WW, 28-31)

While her mother told her old stories from the Civil War, her mammy Lizzie Jones soon spurred her literary creativity with fantastic bedtime stories they would start together and continue every night. In her autobiography, Glasgow recalls the creation of Little Willie, the first fictional character that appeared in her mind, although she cannot remember whether it was she or Lizzie Jones who first thought of him. (WW, 23-24) Her father’s elder sister Rebecca, whom the author defines as “the perfect story-teller” (WW, 24) and her mother’s friend Miss Virginia Rawlings — who, unlike Aunt Bec, “knew only the drama that was reality” (WW, 38) — completed the circle of foremothers from whom Glasgow first learnt to love story-telling.

The only male figure to which Glasgow felt truly devoted as a child was her brother Frank, although he cannot be considered entirely as an exception or as a male intruder in Glasgow's exclusively female circle. According to critics and biographers, Frank was a delicate and oversensitive child who greatly enjoyed the company of his sisters.<sup>27</sup> His father decided to send him to the Virginia Military Institute, considered to be the West Point of the South, "in the vain hope that the training might harden him." According to Glasgow, however, Frank was "the last boy on earth who should have been sent to a military academy." (WW, 65-66) Though truly devoted to his mother and possibly homosexual, Frank endured the hard training at the academy and, once he graduated, he worked in the Tredegar Iron Works without complaining. Nevertheless, as the author mentions in her autobiography, Frank was never the same after he came back from the academy, and his remoteness increased as the years went by.

Illness and invalidism were central to Glasgow's life, and they certainly conditioned her from early childhood. She never attended school for a long time, due to her delicate constitution and her recurring migraines. In fact, doctors advised her mother

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Susan Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 30-31; or Pamela Matthews, *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Traditions* (Charlottesville and London: the University Press of Virginia, 1994) 71.

not to begin teaching her, as they were not certain whether she would reach adulthood. (WW, 24) She was not even allowed to go out and play in the street with the rest of the children for fear she would get ill. As far as the author remembers, she always felt apart and lonely, even more so when her mother and the benevolent but old-fashioned physician Dr. Coleman both pitied and encouraged her delicacy. (WW, 49-50) But Glasgow did learn to read and write, and soon became an avid reader; she even recalls being paid in exchange for not reading certain books. (WW, 92-93) At the country house of Jerdone Castle, where the family spent the summer during Glasgow's childhood, she could play in the open air, while she made her first attempts at writing poetry. At Jerdone she also met her beloved friend Carrie Coleman; together with Lizzie Jones, they would roam in the forest and give names to the trees. Those happy days, though, were soon to end.

As has been mentioned in the introduction, Glasgow began to have hearing problems in 1889, and the horror of deafness continued to haunt her for the rest of her life. Besides, the author was always aware of the legacy of nervous disorders that her mother had left, and which various members of her family had inherited. In 1890, and with the help of her sister Cary, she went to New York in order to find a publisher for her first novel, *Sharp Realities*, where she was sexually harassed by a literary

agent.<sup>28</sup> The morning after that unnerving experience, she sent for her manuscript and destroyed it. In 1891, though, she started to write *The Descendant*. Two years later, she again destroyed the manuscript after her mother's death in October 1893. In 1895 she would return to the undestroyed portion of the novel and finish it.

However, those would not be the only obstacles the author had to face. When searching for a publisher for the new version of *The Descendant*, she encountered the reluctance of publishing houses to accept manuscripts from young women, especially if they were “young enough to have babies.” (WW, 107) One of Glasgow's best friends, Louise Collier Wilcox, arranged a meeting in New York between the author and her brother, Price Collier, who worked at Macmillan. After politely but frankly telling her there was no hope that Macmillan would publish her novel (without even taking the trouble to read the manuscript), he advised her “to stop writing, and go back to the South and have some babies . . . The greatest woman is not the woman who has written the finest book, but the woman who has had the finest babies.” (WW, 108) With the help of an acquaintance from the University Publishing Company, her book was finally published anonymously by Harper in 1897. From then on, Glasgow would never again face difficulties for getting her books published, as

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<sup>28</sup> See WW, 96-97 or page 4 of my introduction for an account of these events.



most of the novels she would produce during the subsequent forty-six years would become best sellers. The following year, *Phases of an Inferior Planet* was published, and *The Voice of the People* would follow in 1900. While *The Descendant* and *Phases of an Inferior Planet* were set in New York, *The Voice of the People* was the first in a series of novels that the author projected as dealing with the “social history” of Virginia, from the Civil War to the present. *The Battle-Ground* (1902) dealt with the war, while *The Deliverance* (1904), like *The Voice of the People*, was concerned with the Reconstruction period. During those years, Glasgow and her sisters made trips to England, Europe and the Middle East.

In the winter of 1899-1900, Ellen Glasgow met and fell in love with a mysterious married man from New York, which she calls “Gerald B--” in her autobiography. In spite of contradictory reports about this relationship, it seems that the love affair between the author and this middle-aged man continued until his death in 1905, which, together with other tragic events, left Glasgow “emotionally drained.” (WW, 171) Once again, though, she managed to overcome grief and defeat and produced another novel, which she nevertheless regarded as a failure. *The Wheel of Life* (1906) deviates from her attempt at writing a social history of Virginia, since the author, as she admits in her autobiography, “was seeking what I did not find, an antidote to

experience, a way out of myself. I was trying to break the inner tight coil of my own misery.” (WW, 171) Not only Gerald’s death but also a series of tragedies in Glasgow’s life, starting with her mother’s death, were the cause of that period of grief:

My mother was the center of my childhood world, the sun in my universe. She made everything luminous – the sky, the street, the trees, the house, the nursery. Her spirit was the loveliest I have ever known, and her life was the saddest. I have two images of her, one a creature of light and the other a figure of tragedy. (WW, 13)

In a single night, or so it seemed to us, my mother was changed from a source of radiant happiness into a chronic invalid, whose nervous equilibrium was permanently damaged. A severe shock, in a critical period, altered her so completely that I should scarcely have known her if I had come upon her after a brief absence. (WW, 61)

The “severe shock” Glasgow alludes to seems to be her mother’s discovery that her husband had been keeping a mulatto mistress. The discovery came at a “critical period” of Anne Gholson’s life, which scholars and biographers like Susan Goodman identify with her menopause.<sup>29</sup> From that period onwards, Glasgow and her sisters lived in constant anxiety over their mother’s sadness, nervous disorders and gradual decay. Anne Gholson’s delicate health, already worn with childbearing, could not get over the nervous breakdown her husband’s betrayal represented. Glasgow’s brother Frank who, according to the author, “was the only one of Mother’s children who never

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<sup>29</sup> Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 19-20.

failed her in word, or in act, or in sympathetic understanding” (WW, 66) became every time more and more estranged from his sisters as his mother’s condition worsened. As Anne Gholson came to dislike Jerdone Castle, Francis Glasgow decided to sell the house. By that time, the family had also moved from 101 Cary Street to the bigger house in One West Main Street, where the author would remain for most of her life.

Anne Gholson’s death in 1893 was the first in a series of tragic episodes in the Glasgow family that would make the author feel surrounded by death and overwhelmed by heartbreak. Cary Glasgow married George Walter McCormack, a liberal lawyer, and went to live in Charleston. Walter, who became Glasgow’s first intellectual mentor, sent her a subscription to the Mercantile Library in New York and encouraged her to read Darwin and German philosophy. After only four years of marriage, Walter apparently committed suicide in New York in 1894. In turn, her brother Frank committed suicide in April 1907, and Cary died on August 19, 1911 after a long and painful illness, possibly uterine cancer.

Cary was Glasgow’s favourite sister and, since her husband’s death, she lived at One West Main and read every chapter of her sister’s books. Cary herself had had aspirations of writing before her marriage, and provided useful comments and permanent support to her sister. Through all the years of Cary’s

illness, friends such as the writer Mary Johnston and Cary's best friend Roberta Wellford helped Glasgow to cope with her sister's decay and death. After Cary was operated in 1910, she came home in the company of Roberta Wellford and a hospital nurse, Anne Virginia Bennett, who stayed to take care of her. After Cary's death in 1911, Anne Virginia remained at One West Main to nurse Glasgow's father and, in later years, to work as both Glasgow's secretary and nurse as her heart began to fail. Bennett became the closest companion to Glasgow for more than thirty years. Though she had a strong dislike towards "people who write", Bennett, like Glasgow, had a liking for the latest fashions and, also like Glasgow, truly adored animals. In her autobiography, she confided that "more than anyone else since I lost Cary, Anne Virginia has had my interests at heart." (WW, 216)

During that period, and in spite of the important losses in her family and the death of Gerald B--, Glasgow wrote three more novels and continued her project of chronicling the social history of Virginia. After *The Wheel of Life*, she published *The Ancient Law* in 1908. *The Romance of a Plain Man* appeared the following year, only some months before Frank committed suicide; the story deals with the working class in the South and modern industrialism. *The Miller of Old Church*, a novel that portrays the lives of poor white farmers "neglected by Southern writers" (WW, 129), was the last thing Cary read in 1911 before

she died. Glasgow would dedicate her next novel, *Virginia* (1913), “To The Radiant Spirit Who Was My Sister Cary Glasgow McCormack”, in whom she had partly inspired its female protagonist.

Shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, Glasgow visited Europe and travelled widely over England with her friend Louise Collier Wilcox. In England she visited Thomas Hardy and his wife at their house Max Gate; she was fascinated to see that the Hardys shared her affection for dogs, and that their lovely terrier Wessex never left their side. She also had the opportunity to spend a day with Joseph Conrad and his family in Kent. After that visit, Glasgow would not go back to England until 1927.

The war left Glasgow desolated but, although she thought she was through with love, love was not quite through with her. In 1915, Ellen Glasgow met Henry Watkins Anderson – the man she identifies as Harold S-- in her autobiography – while having lunch at a friend’s house, becoming engaged to him in 1917. Anderson left for Romania with the Red Cross and Anne Virginia Bennett was sent to France as a nurse, but Glasgow continued to write. She published *Life and Gabriella* in January 1916, the same month in which her father Francis Glasgow died at age eighty-six. *The Builders* appeared in 1919. Her engagement to Henry Anderson was broken in 1920, but their relationship would continue intermittently for some twenty years. Despite the

failure of their engagement, Ellen Glasgow always felt grateful to Anderson for the Christmas present he gave her in 1921. Jeremy, a Sealyham puppy of seven months, became Glasgow's favourite dog and, together with Billy, a poodle, made the gloomy house at One West Main bright and cheerful. (*WW*, 246-247)

Glasgow published *One Man in His Time* in 1922, and her collection of stories, which had appeared separately in several magazines, was published under the title *The Shadowy Third and Other Stories* in 1923. A complete volume of her short fiction would not be compiled and published until 1963.<sup>30</sup> In 1924 she became president of the Richmond Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, of which she had long been an active member. Since the publication of *Virginia* in 1913, Glasgow felt her work was not achieving the quality she desired: at fifty-two, she believed her best novels were still ahead of her and, according to most critics, she was right.

*Barren Ground* (1925) has been acclaimed as her best novel. Its protagonist, Dorinda Oakley, deserted by her lover, struggles to build a new life and manages to succeed without male support. Dorinda's experience reflects in many ways Glasgow's own life: as she recollects in *The Woman Within*, "when I began *Barren Ground*, I knew I had found a code of living that was sufficient

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<sup>30</sup> Richard K. Meeker edited the volume, entitled *The Collected Stories of Ellen Glasgow* (see List of Abbreviations for a full reference, otherwise cited as *CSS*)

for life or for death.” (WW, 271) The novel can be viewed as a literary adaptation of Glasgow’s formula for a fulfilling life without marriage, an institution towards which she had always been suspicious:

I wrote *Barren Ground*, and immediately I knew I had found myself. Recognition, so long delayed, increased with each book. 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 tranquility. Yes, it was true. I was free from chains. I belonged to myself.  
(WW, 243-245)

*Barren Ground* would be the first of Glasgow’s most celebrated novels, and her confidence as a writer increased in every new work she published. After the turning point that *Barren Ground* signified, Glasgow continued to work on her highly praised Queenborough trilogy: *The Romantic Comedians* (1926), *They Stooped to Folly* (1929), and *The Sheltered Life* (1932) The latter became a firm candidate for the Pulitzer Prize. Glasgow intended the three novels to be comedies of manners, although her analysis of the situation of Virginia women through the decades around the fin de siècle makes them both tragic and universal, appealing to all women not only in America but also in the world. Her next novel, *Vein of Iron* (1935), successfully melted the main themes of *Barren Ground* and the Queenborough trilogy.

During those years of intense creative energy — as one can read in her autobiography, she felt she was younger at sixty than she had been at twenty

(WW, 270) — Glasgow made another trip to England with Caroline Coleman Duke in 1927. There she met Thomas Hardy and his wife again, and visited Hugh Walpole and Frank Swinnerton. Her autobiography recalls the pleasure of meeting Mrs. Harold Nicolson, Vita Sackville-West, whose hospitality was more than kind. (WW, 257) She was disappointed to learn that Virginia Woolf was not in London at that moment, although she sent an affectionate note to Glasgow. She travelled to England and France again in 1930. Her last trip to Europe would be in 1937, where she visited her friend Mrs. John Kerr Branch in Italy with Carrie Coleman Duke.

Glasgow's novels became more widely acclaimed from the 1930s onwards, although her heart began to fail during the same period. Among other honours, she received the degree of Doctor of Letters from the University of North Carolina in 1930 and she was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1932. She received the degree of Doctor of Laws from the University of Richmond and the University of Duke in 1938, and was elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters later in the same year. In 1939 she received the degree of Doctor of Laws from the College of William and Mary, and she was awarded the Howells Medal by the American Academy of Arts and Letters the following year.

The final recognition to her literary career came after the writing of her penultimate novel, *In This Our Life* (1941), which became another bestseller. The novel was released into a Hollywood film version with Olivia de Havilland and Bette Davis and finally earned her the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1942. For the last few years, she spent her summers in Castine, Maine, where she gathered enough strength to continue writing in spite of her serious heart condition. Though sometimes she could only work for a few



minutes at a time, (WW, 286-288) she managed to write a sequel to *In This Our Life*. The sequel, entitled *Beyond Defeat*, was not published until 1966.<sup>31</sup> She also compiled her book of prefaces, *A Certain Measure*, and completed her autobiography, *The Woman Within*, which she had been working at since 1934. She arranged to have it published posthumously, leaving the manuscript to the care of her literary executors, Irita van Doren and Frank V. Morley. Ellen Glasgow died at her home in One West Main on the 21st of November 1945, at age seventy-two. Her autobiography was first published in 1954 and Blair Rouse edited a collection of her letter in 1958.<sup>32</sup>

### 3. Ellen Glasgow in Context.

#### 3.1. A Brief Background to Post-bellum Virginia and the Southern States.

*The South needed blood and irony.  
Blood . . . because Southern culture  
had strained far away from its roots  
in the earth . . . And irony is an  
indispensable ingredient of the  
critical vision; it is the safest  
antidote to sentimental decay.  
Ellen Glasgow, A Certain Measure  
(1943)*

Although the white aristocracy traditionally governed Southern society, planters were a minority. This small and privileged elite, according to the figures given by Tindall and Shi in *America. A Narrative History*, constituted less than a four per cent of the adult white males in the South, but perceived themselves as community leaders and their interests as the interests of the entire South.<sup>33</sup> Most Southerners were small farmers or

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<sup>31</sup> See footnote 17 in the introduction of this dissertation for a full reference of this work.

<sup>32</sup> See footnote 1 in this section for a full reference of this collection, otherwise cited as *LL*.

yeomen who owned no more than half a dozen slaves and cultivated cotton, tobacco, or sugar, but also provided for most of the food their families ate. The majority of yeomen lived in two-roomed houses on a sometimes insufficient diet and no literature but the Bible and the local paper. Even though many middle-class farmers owned no slaves, most of them supported the slave system, as they enjoyed the privileged status race gave them and did not wish to compete with blacks for land.

Below these farmers were a class known as “white trash.” As historian Samuel E. Morison contends, undernourished, barefoot, illiterate, and bitter haters of the blacks, “their only pride was their color.”<sup>34</sup> The consequences of dietary deficiencies and numerous infections, according to Tindall and Shi, gave rise to “a trilogy of ‘lazy diseases’: hookworm, malaria, and pellagra,” which produced a kind of lethargy that branded them as useless vagrants.<sup>35</sup> They were also called “dirt eaters”, because undernourishment often resulted in a craving to chew clay, as certain clays apparently possessed nutritional and medicinal qualities. Indeed, their white skins were virtually the only thing that separated white trash from the utter dehumanisation that black slaves suffered. Another social group, the “hillbillies”, were completely different: they lived in the secluded valleys or in the mountains, almost completely isolated from the rest of the South. They were proud and independent people, expert hunters and fishermen who

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<sup>33</sup> George Brown Tindall and David Emory Shi, *America. A Narrative History* (New York and London: Norton, 1984) 638.

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People, Volume Two: 1789 through Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972) 257.

<sup>35</sup> Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 641.

were only seen when they marketed their homemade goods in the nearest town.

In spite of all these differences, and as Tindall and Shi point out, the decision of the slaveholders to retain control over the Afro-American slave population created “a sense of racial unity that muted conflict among whites.”<sup>36</sup> The South had attracted few immigrants after the Revolution, basically because ships from Europe went to Northern ports and because immigrants knew it would be difficult to compete with slave labour. The white South became more and more conscious of its status as a minority, even more so when slavery was increasingly under attack and the Southern distinctive way of life became isolated and odious to the eyes of the Western world.

The years before the Civil War were to be crucial in the future of the South, as the gentry and the middle class chose to remain loyal to the institution of slavery: meanwhile, Britain had emancipated the slaves in the West Indies and abolitionist voices were becoming louder in the North. As Morison notes, middle- and lower-class Southerners, fearful of losing their few privileges as whites and unwilling to compete with blacks for the land, channelled their attitudes towards Afro-Americans into politics and prevented the possibility of a gradual emancipation of slaves:

The old Federalists and Jeffersonian leaders in the South were well-educated and thoughtful men, in close touch with English and European currents of thought. They looked forward to eventual emancipation of the slaves, and might have put it across, . . . But . . . a tide of provincial, ill-educated politicians .

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 628.

. . . catered to the prejudices of the middle-class and poor whites. Only a minority of the middle class . . . were slave-owners; but for the most part they were “nigger-haters” who did not imagine it possible to keep blacks in order except as slaves. This new race of Southern politicians, instead of preparing the South to face inevitable emancipation and seek a peaceful way out, flattered people into fatal belief in the righteousness of slavery and their own ability to protect the “peculiar institution” perpetually. Southern policy then came to be based on two principles which were assumed to have divine sanction: (1) Blacks are an inferior race and must be kept subordinate, like children who cannot take care of themselves. (2) The only way to do this is to keep them in a slave status.

The second axiom was blown up at Appomattox. But the first, after the lapse of another century, is still believed by middle- and lower-class whites whom democracy has brought into power.<sup>37</sup>

Slavery, the “peculiar institution” of the South, was the pillar of its economy, and ultimately became one of the causes for the outbreak of the Civil War. Before the 1820s, the general attitude of the planter class was to apologise for slavery as a necessary ill to support their economic system. From that period onwards, though, the Southern gentry became more and more convinced that slavery was not only necessary but also the only possible way to keep blacks under control.

On April 14, 1865, the evening of Good Friday and scarcely a week after the Confederate defeat at Appomattox, Abraham Lincoln went to the theatre. The play was so attractive that the President’s bodyguard slipped away to watch it, and John Wilkes Booth, an embittered Virginia actor, took advantage of the opportunity and shot Lincoln across his head. Lincoln died the next morning in a house across the theatre and, according to historian

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<sup>37</sup> Morison, *The Oxford History of the American People*, 269-270.

Hugh Brogan, with him died “the remote chance of a good peace.”<sup>38</sup> Lincoln was succeeded by his Vice-President Andrew Johnson, from Tennessee, who enjoyed a great reputation as the only Southern Senator who had remained loyal to the Union.

The first great issue the victorious North had to confront was to determine what was to be done with the states that had segregated. Lincoln had already stated his view that the Southern secession had never been legal, so the government should deal with the disloyal individuals who had stirred the rebellion and avoid being too hard on the states. In fact, the only condition Lincoln exacted of the ex-Confederate states was loyalty to the U.S. Constitution and obedience to the laws of the Congress. Before the war was over, new governments had been set up in Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas and Louisiana. The former president of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, was kept in prison for two years but was never hanged. Similarly, the chivalric surrender of the Virginian Robert E. Lee at Appomattox allowed him to spend his last years at home and other Confederate leaders also went home peacefully. Lee’s brilliant leadership of the Confederate army and his dignity in defeat won admiration, and the Southern attempts for independence started to be regarded as “the Lost Cause.”

The major concern of the government, though, was the condition of former slaves, whose numbers extended to four and a half million and without whose help the Union would not have succeeded in the war. During Lincoln’s life, in March 1865, the Congress had established the Freedmen’s

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<sup>38</sup> Hugh Brogan, *The Penguin History of the United States of America* (London: Penguin, 1985) 357.

Bureau to offer guidance and support to Afro-Americans. In December of the same year, it ratified the Thirteenth Amendment of the Constitution, which abolished slavery. Johnson's intransigent personality and his ambiguous attitude towards Afro-Americans, though, effaced all hopes for black citizenship and led the country to a struggle for equal rights, which was to last well until the twentieth century. In short, Johnson's policy consisted in readmitting ex-rebel states to Congress once they acknowledged the Constitution and accepted the Thirteenth Amendment. If they accepted those conditions, nothing more could be demanded of them, and Southern Representatives and Senators were free to legislate on matters concerning their states. In practice, this meant that they could deal with the 'Negro question' in their own terms. Southerners were extremely bitter against Northerners, the Constitution and, above all, freed slaves. As Hugh Brogan contends,

it would be long before anyone would accept that the whole secessionist adventure might have been morally wrong, socially unwise, politically misconceived. Southern women, particularly, remained ferociously loyal to 'the Cause'. Mourning and commemoration were to be major preoccupations for several generations to come; soon war-memorials appeared in every important Southern town, usually in the form of a statue of a boy in grey, his heroic young face staring resolutely northwards. The Yankees were not forgiven; their protégés, the freedmen, were not accepted. Slavery was dead, but slavery was what the Africans were meant for, and something as near as possible to slavery was what they were going to get. The South might have been defeated in war, but her resources for racial oppression were by no means exhausted.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 362.

According to Brogan, the Southern response to the Afro-American question had two principal expressions: one of them was the founding of the Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee, on Christmas Eve 1865; the other, Johnsonian legislatures. As soon as new governments were formed, they began to pass the so-called 'Black Codes', which denied Afro-Americans almost every civil right and tried to maintain, as far as possible, antebellum slavery laws. They recognised black marriages as legal (though not to a white person), their right to sue or be sued in courts and testify against whites, their right to hold property, and their right to be paid wages for their work. On the other hand, they were denied the right to strike or leave their employment. If any black people were found unemployed or travelling without their employer's permission, they would be arrested and returned to whatever white who required their services. Nothing was done to provide Afro-Americans with the education they had cherished so much.

In view of Johnson's silence, it was left to the Congress to express indignation over the Black Codes and denounce Southern legislators. The Congress provided that until a new programme of reconstruction was issued, none of the Southern representatives would be allowed to take their seats on the grounds that the Black Codes were illegal. President Johnson denounced these measures as unconstitutional. A Fourteenth Amendment was passed establishing the right of all U.S. citizens to equal protection of the laws. The U.S. Constitution defined a U.S. citizen as anyone "born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof,"<sup>40</sup> in order to include Afro-Americans. The Congress also gave more power to the

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<sup>40</sup> Commission on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, *The Constitution of the United States with Index and the Declaration of Independence* (Washington D.C., 1991) 25.

Freedmen's Bureau and passed a civil rights law to prevent racial discrimination by Southern legislators. The Fifteenth Amendment, passed in 1869, explicitly stated that citizens' rights were not to be denied "on account of race, color, or any previous condition of servitude."<sup>41</sup> Johnson vetoed both acts, although both were later passed.

After the defeat in the Civil War, the Reconstruction era brought change to a stagnating South that still clung to old traditions of grandeur. A largely agrarian system was slowly substituted by industrialisation, while the railway gradually took the South out of its isolation. The Republican government's aim was to industrialise the South and transform its plantation agriculture into a system of family farms so as to destroy the political and social legacy of the slave-holding aristocracy. The problem in the South, though, was that the disappearance of slavery had left a void in economy, and therefore, society had to be completely remodelled. The Southern crops of cotton, tobacco and sugar had left the soil exhausted and subject to erosion. Moreover, during the antebellum years the South had become dependent on Northern manufacturing and trade and British textile industry for the exportation of their cotton. The benefits of agricultural activity, unlike in other regions, were not invested in technical improvements or new machinery, but in the purchase of more slaves and more land. Although there were attempts to diversify Southern economy, the South had remained primarily dependent on cotton. Tindall and Shi offer two major explanations for the lack of industrial development in the South.<sup>42</sup> In the first place, blacks were thought unsuitable for factory work and unable to adjust to a timetable. Secondly, the gentry had developed "a lordly disdain for the practice of trade" and derived its prestige from owning land and slaves. By 1860, the price of cotton had lowered and demands from British textile

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>42</sup> Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 635.



factories had decreased, but the South was tied to cotton production for generations to come.

The black people were prepared to work in the cotton fields again, but on entirely different terms: they wanted to own the lands they worked at least to support themselves and their families, they were eager to get an education, and they rejected any form of labour organisation that resembled slavery. Thus, the labour supply and agricultural production dropped dramatically. Moreover, the price of cotton fell as other regions started to compete with the South. For the South, “reconstruction” did not mean, as did for the North, the re-introduction of defeated states into politics, but what Brogan defines as “rebuilding society from the foundations.”<sup>43</sup> The planter class, although bankrupt (most had mortgaged their estates to support the Confederate effort), still owned the land, and the Black Codes had tried to maintain the old plantation system, but the ex-slaves did no longer accept those terms. For poor farmers, both black and white, the situation was hopeless, especially if the crops were not abundant, and most of them remained undernourished, ill clothed, and illiterate. The Southern aristocrats, fearing that poor whites and blacks would form an alliance against their interests, passed a series of so-called “Jim Crow” laws which excluded Afro-Americans from voting, from almost every occupation except the poorest, and from white residential areas, schools, universities, hotels, restaurants, and even public transport. By 1867, the Klan had started to use its well-known brutal methods to prevent Afro-Americans from voting and to scare black people away from the lands they had managed to occupy.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 375.

According to Hugh Brogan, Reconstruction failed both Southern whites and blacks alike. Most Southern blacks, intimidated by the Klan and without economic resources, were prevented from exercising their rights, became tenant farmers of their former masters' land and were caught in a circle of poverty. For Southern whites the prospects were not much better: in a region devastated by war and further impoverished by mismanagement, the agrarian South became increasingly nostalgic of the glorious antebellum days. As Brogan points out,

a land of introversion and provincialism, a land, it seemed, without hope; a land paying a tragic price for tragic miscalculations . . . . An economic and educational system devised principally to keep things as they were, and the blacks unprivileged, was unable to do much for its white citizens either.<sup>44</sup>

The Bible had sanctioned the planters' view that the black race was inferior and therefore divinely appointed to serve whites. The planter social system had been demonised by the Western world and defeated by the victorious North, which encouraged orthodox religious attitudes and a romantic view of the planter class through chivalric literary tradition. Tindall and Shi borrow historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown's opinion that the obsession with honour, common among the Irish, Scottish, Cornish and Welsh, from whom most white Southerners descended, provided "the psychological and social underpinnings of Southern culture."<sup>45</sup> In the same way Southern cavaliers defended their honour, women were supposed to protect their virtue. As Tindall and Shi argue, "[a]ccording to the prevailing ideology of

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<sup>44</sup> Brogan, *The Penguin History of the United States of America*, 383.

<sup>45</sup> Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 642.

womanhood, Southern ladies reinforced exaggerated gallantry . . . in their men.”<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese holds a similar view in her book *Within the Plantation Household*: as she notes, “the emphasis on female delicacy and frailty implicitly recognized the positive value of male strength. In a dangerous world ladies required protection against unruly men, white as well as black.”<sup>47</sup>

Women were crucial in Southern culture as the objects of male chivalry and the subjects of patriarchal rule. As the following paragraphs illustrate, women were an essential (though totally disempowered) part of the Southern slave-holding system: “[w]omen, like children, have only one right — the right to protection. The right to protection involves the obligation to obey.”<sup>48</sup> The myth of the Southern lady celebrated the virtues of domesticity, Christian devotion and willing submission to the needs of husband and children. She was supposed to remain sexually passive, morally superior, domestic and self-sacrificing, although many Southern women had to cope with situations that were much less than idyllic.

As Fox-Genovese posits, “[t]he distinct southern form of male dominance was anchored in the household as the fundamental productive and reproductive unit of slave society.”<sup>49</sup> Historian Ellen Plante asserts that the Southern tradition of having large families, as well as patriarchal and religious control, exposed women to the life-threatening dangers of

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 643.

<sup>47</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill and London: the University of North Carolina Press, 1988) 197.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

numerous childbirths.<sup>50</sup> Infant mortality was high, and the distance between properties in rural areas frequently left women isolated from female relatives and friends who could provide companionship and moral support in distress. The prevailing rural character of the South and the consequent lack of urban centres kept women in an almost lifelong state of seclusion within the household. As a result, as Fox-Genovese aptly remarks, Southern women were excluded

from many of the opportunities that were opening up for their northern sisters, notably to live and work independently by their own labor, to develop sustained female networks beyond the household, and to form voluntary associations of various kinds.<sup>51</sup>

Both in antebellum and post-bellum times, most plantation mistresses — except those few whose husbands were amazingly rich — were expected to supervise all the household affairs, such as cooking, cleaning, educating the children, taking care of the elderly and the ill members of the family, overseeing domestic servants, etc. Moreover, planter wives had to take care of the slaves, and saw their leisure time further diminished by the constant demands this duty implied: nursing the sick, helping to deliver slave babies, providing food and clothing, and a thousand other details.

As Caroline Clinton states in *Tara Revisited*, “women did not inhabit mythical estates” but were enslaved by the exhausting chores of plantation life: “[c]otton was king, white men ruled, and both white women and slaves

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<sup>50</sup> Ellen M. Plante, *Women at Home in Victorian America: A Social History* (New York: Facts on File, 1997) 78.

<sup>51</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 70.

served the same master.”<sup>52</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese similarly remarks that “the power of the master constituted the lynch pin of slavery as a social system, and no one ever satisfactorily defined its limits.”<sup>53</sup> However, she disagrees with Clinton in the notion that the plantation mistress can be identified with her black sisters as “the slave of slaves.” Although she notes that mistresses had to assume heavy responsibilities as regards the management of domestic slaves, Fox-Genovese contends that Southern slaveholding women, quite understandably,

accepted their position of dependency within the household more readily than slave women . . . Their class position afforded them innumerable privileges relative to the other women in their society. They did not commonly bemoan this social and economic position.<sup>54</sup>

Fox-Genovese continues to say that many white mistresses were in fact very far from feeling any sort of sympathy towards the plight of their black servants. On the contrary, she provides evidence that “mistresses could be the very devil. A mean mistress stood second to no master in her cruelty . . . mistresses could and did brutally abuse their female slaves.”<sup>55</sup>

Most historians, however, agree in the fact that one of the main grievances of Southern ladies was their obligation to submit to the code of genteel domesticity, while they simultaneously had to confront a double moral and sexual standard. While they were supposed to behave as angels of purity and chastity, they helplessly faced positive evidence that their fathers,

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<sup>52</sup> Caroline Clinton, *Tara Revisited: Women, War & the Plantation Legend* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1995) 42.

<sup>53</sup> Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 326.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 48, 96.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

husbands, brothers and sons sexually abused the female slaves.<sup>56</sup> As Tindall and Shi quote from the diary of Mary Boykin Chestnut, a planter wife from South Carolina,

there is no slave like a wife . . . God forgive us, but ours is a monstrous system. Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and their concubines; and the mulattoes one sees in every family partly resemble the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody's household but her own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds.<sup>57</sup>

It is precisely the plight of the Southern lady both in antebellum and postbellum Virginia, with its double sexual standard and its strict moral codes that constitutes the core of Ellen Glasgow's fiction. Educated in the tradition of the genteel woman by a father who preached and imposed strict Calvinist morals but kept a mulatto mistress, the author soon rejected the submissive role she was expected to fulfil. With subtle irony towards chivalric men and deep sympathy towards victimised women, she exposed the evils of a system that placed the Southern Belle on a pedestal of virtue only to abandon her in the suffocating gloom of domesticity, helplessness and inadequacy.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 323-326. Fox-Genovese provides striking, sometimes very disturbing examples of the sexual abuse of masters to slave women, as well as of the often unsympathetic (and sometimes even cruel) response of white mistresses.

<sup>57</sup> Tindall and Shi, *America: A Narrative History*, 639.