3.2. Social Situation of Women in the South at the Fin de Siècle.

Literature on child rearing, genteel women's magazines, children's books, all required of women a displacement of their wishes and abilities onto the men of their lives.[1]

Throughout the forty-six years of her literary career, Ellen Glasgow repeatedly denounced the situation of women in Virginia in her novels, and made the plight of woman one of her central themes. Along with her "social history" of Virginia, Glasgow chronicled the social and economic conditions that excluded women from active life, her novels exceeding by far the seventy-two years of her life. *The Battle Ground* starts in 1850, while the South still enjoyed the leisure of antebellum plantation life, and her last novel, *In This Our Life*, finishes in 1939. As Elizabeth Gallup Myer notes,

> there runs throughout her novels a rebellious voice against the social situation of women . . . Her novels were influential in the emancipation of modern woman, and if they did not hew the way with an axe, they certainly marked it with a rapier. [2]

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 purely ornamental Southern beauty, sitting glamorously in the porch, or waltzing in frilling dresses made with tons of silk and lace, was gone with the wind. As Fox-Genovese remarks, some antebellum women actually owned estates,

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[1] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985) 213.
[2] Elizabeth Gallup Myer, *The Social Situation of Women in the Novels of Ellen Glasgow* (Hicksville: Exposition Press, 1978) 22.

although only very few of them actually managed them: they instead left their properties in the hands of husbands, male relatives or hired overseers.[3] The Civil War, however, forced women who, like Glasgow's mother, had been educated in the genteel tradition,[4] to cope with the several plantation affairs without male supervision and protection. Besides the many domestic duties planter wives traditionally carried out before the war, they now had to deal with commercial and financial matters like supervising the crops and selling the cotton. Furthermore, they had to protect their families from starvation, plunder by both Union soldiers and Confederate stragglers, even rape and murder. After their husbands came back from the war, though, women resumed their old status of mere decorative objects and were again excluded from social or economic activity. While the antebellum days and ways of life gradually faded into memory and nostalgia, its legends became more and more magnified both in the social and the literary domain.

The end of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century still validated the strict antebellum codes of behaviour and thought for women in the South. Glasgow's most celebrated novels portray ravishing beauties who suffer silently and do their best to conceal their or (more frequently) their husbands' failures in order to preserve an appearance of happiness and convention. Glasgow consistently attacked the old codes operating in the good society of Virginia at the time: while she sympathised with the sheltered but victimised womanly woman, she created more powerful heroines who dared to take a step forward and out of that shelter. Both types of woman are analysed in Elizabeth Myer's study *The Social Situation of Women in the Novels of*

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[3] See 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) 206.

[4] As the author mentions in her autobiography, according to stories she heard from people who knew her mother when she was young, Anne Gholson "had never stooped to pick up a handkerchief." (*WW*, 64)

Ellen Glasgow. Myer divides Glasgow's female characters under the following categories: the wife, the frustrated spinster, the gay and/or sophisticated lady, the perpetual widow, and the rare careerist. After reading some of Glasgow's fiction, it appeared to me that Myer's classification could be ambiguous since, for example, not all the women who were economically independent could be defined as careerists. Hence, and taking as a basis Myer's categories, I have classified the social types appearing in Glasgow's novels and short fiction in the following way: the wife/mother, the frustrated spinster, the fallen woman, the self-supporting woman and the New Woman. Of course, many of the characters may fall into more than one of these categories, but all of them reflect the precarious and dependent social status of the Southern woman.

The only possible purpose in the life of a true Southern Belle was to love and to be loved. For the womanly woman, marriage and motherhood contained the highest measure of happiness attainable. Virginian homemakers had to fulfil the impossible mission of being the perfect helpmeet, raise their children, and providing for the household (often on scant budgets), while remaining beautiful, innocent, devoted and unselfish, almost ethereal. However, as Kathryn Lee Seidl notes,

> for the southern belle the ultimate moment in one's life occurs during courtship — marriage, children, sex are all disappointing in comparison; thus Glasgow's mothers console themselves for the bleak hardships of the present with narcissistic regressions.[5]

Lucy Pendleton and Virginia Treadwell in *Virginia*, or Eva Birdsong in *The Sheltered Life* are some of the many Belles in Glasgow's fiction who embody the myth

[5] 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. 289.

of the womanly woman but find that married life is much less than idyllic. The dangers of raising women at the level of allegories and placing them on a pedestal is precisely the delusion that occurs when their feet touch the ground. Conditioned to believe their romantic illusions about marriage, women are victimised mainly by those who have created these illusions. Tragedy becomes unavoidable for women once they realise that marriage and motherhood have failed to provide happiness, and their adherence to this idealistic code of behaviour prevents them from finding an escape to that tragedy.

While the beauty's role as a loving wife was doomed to selflessness and disappointment, the plain woman's fate could be even darker. In a society that venerated beauty as the greatest blessing in a woman, its absence condemned women to a life of spinsterhood, sometimes useful but mostly parasitic. Since women were almost exclusively restricted to the home and conditioned to believe that their only reason for existence was to become the object of male desire, spinsters often felt empty of purpose and completely useless. They usually lacked any social life and remained in the house of a male relative, most of the times becoming unpaid servants.

The fallen woman is one of the social types Glasgow most delighted in portraying. She again denounced the status quo that condemned the seduced woman to perpetual spinsterhood and public shame, while it left the seducer unpunished and his reputation unspoilt. For a greater comfort of the gentleman in question, the finest tradition in the South forbid a seduced woman to reveal the name of her betrayer. A lady caught in the old superstition of the fallen woman usually had to give her baby away to be adopted (in the case she happened to get pregnant) and was forced to lead the life of a recluse, again under the protection of some male relative. Glasgow's fiction manifests open indignation towards this situation and defies it by creating female

characters that refuse to wear, as Elizabeth Myer points out, "their invisible scarlet letter" and struggle to live their lives on their own terms.[6]

Together with the fallen women, Glasgow repeatedly reminded the Southern reader that a whole gallery of adventurous ladies of uncertain reputation could be found in almost every respectable neighbourhood: "even in Virginia, where the flower of womanhood blossomed to its highest perfection, there were the ladies of dubious reputation, both in and out of the best circles, and no social history could fail to take them into account."[7] Glasgow supported the suffragist movement and participated in two demonstrations, one in New York with Mary Johnston and one in London with May Sinclair in 1909.[8] She also formed part of the Virginia League for Woman Suffrage in Richmond and frequently attended its meetings with her sister Cary.[9] Nevertheless, she found it very difficult to reconcile her feminist ideas and her suffragette friends like Mary Johnston and May Sinclair with lifelong acquaintances who belonged to Anti-Suffragist associations. Glasgow's novels exhibit a few brilliant examples of women who openly and firmly ask for the vote, like delightful Aunt Matoaca in *The Romance of a Plain Man* (1909). Nevertheless, she was more immediately concerned with woman's social status in Virginia — and its economic and educational side-effects — than with woman's admission in political life.

Among the less fortunate spinsters or the fallen women, Glasgow considered other female characters who managed to make a living in one of the few professions

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[6] Myer, *Social Situation*, 43.
[7] Ibid., 46.
[8] Sinclair advised her to leave before the march ended, "because she thought there might be arrests at the end" (*WW*, 186) and she was still in great distress for her brother Frank, who had died a few months before.
[9] As Glasgow recalls in her autobiography, she and Cary (while Cary's health allowed her to do so) attended these meetings along with a "few bold spirits" who glanced around "as they ascended the front steps, to assure themselves that no strayed male was watching them." The meetings were held in the Victorian drawing-room of Mrs. Clayton Glanville Coleman, mother of her friend Caroline Coleman, an elderly lady who "had been the beauty of Winchester." (*WW*, 185-186) After the first meeting, Glasgow and her sister convinced Lila Meade Valentine to become the president of the Virginia League for Woman Suffrage.

that were permitted to genteel ladies of reduced means. According to Myer, the women belonging to the social category she defines as "the rare careerist" could only provide a living for themselves by means of teaching, sewing, or running a boarding house. That is, if they wished to preserve their social decorum and be admitted in good society.[10] Though Glasgow gives numerous and convincing examples of these often bleak and frustrated women, she also supplies the reader with brilliant instances of female characters taking up professions which deviate from the ones tolerated for genteel ladies.

The New Woman repeatedly appears in Glasgow's novels and short fiction as a new specimen who refuses the prevailing standards of behaviour and engages in more ambitious careers and even manages to attend college. Sometimes because of personal or professional talents, and sometimes because of the compelling necessity to increase the family's income, New Women succeed in modern careers: Caroline Meade in *The Builders* trains a nurse, and Dorinda Oakley becomes a prominent farmer in *Barren Ground*. Glasgow even winks at the reader by depicting female characters who take up the rare option of writing as a means of survival. Miss Amanda Sheppard, as Miss Batte recalls in *Virginia*, was forced to write only because of compelling necessity: "Why, when little Miss Amanda Sheppard was left at sixty without a roof over her head, she began at once, without saying a word to anybody, to write historical novels."(*V*, 16) Miss Margaret French in "Thinking Makes It So" similarly supports her family by writing poetry. Regardless of the option they chose to take, Glasgow unfailingly proved that the Southern genteel woman could change her social situation from helpless dependant to successful professional — without ceasing to be a lady.

[10] Myer, *Social Situation*, 48-49.

Ellen Glasgow refused to prolong the tradition of the genteel woman and pointed at the evils of continuing to educate women to fit into a tight frame of excessive sentiment and null intellectual development. Glasgow's rage against the social status of women had its core in the denunciation of what she termed "evasive idealism", which Elizabeth Gallup Myer defines as follows:

> through the lines or behaviour of her characters, she attacked the attitude, based upon sentimentalism, that blindly ignored the presence of ugliness: the attitude that leaned toward looking on the bright side of life, that preferred to cling to a dream world of tradition rather than to face the problems of the immediate present, that trusted in an antiquity on the sheer basis of its age, that let the world go by from simple inertia, that could not admit the urgency of the moment's challenge. [11]

The South surpassed the North both in the institutions of higher education for women and in the number of degrees given to women in the 1890s. Nevertheless, the opportunities for Southern women were everything but equal to those of men or to those of Northern women, whose colleges offered instruction of a much superior quality. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese states in *Within the Plantation Household*, "no southern woman shared equal access to schooling with the men of her own class."[12] She points at the fact that, by the mid-nineteenth century, most women attended schools and academies that were managed by either the church or political leaders, which obviously implies that they were instructed according to the prevailing patriarchal ideology. As Ellen Glasgow ironically observed in many of her novels, intelligence was seldom regarded as a quality in a Southern woman, as the nineteenth century male-shaped conception of womanhood consisted basically in satisfying masculine vanity. In order to fit into the ideal their society demanded, as Glasgow recounts especially in *Virginia*, young women of the genteel South went through an education that was at its best shallow and stereotyped, at its worst repressing and suffocating to women's intellects.

[11] Ibid., 30.
[12] Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household*, 46.

Schools like Miss Priscilla Batte's in *Virginia* provides all the necessary refinements to become a perfect specimen of womanly woman, but fail to equip young girls with any knowledge to help them in life.

This "grave misconception of reality", as Elizabeth Myer posits, combined with strong doses of religious dogma, forced women to remain content without the possibility of achieving financial independence or intellectual development, not to speak of participation in public or political affairs.[13] The Protestant Episcopal Church and the Presbyterian Church played an important role in turning these perfect roses of statuesque beauty into victims of sacrifice and self-immolation. Religion, as well as the condition of absolute helplessness that surrounded Southern girls of good society, helped to create the necessary hothouse in which these sublime roses grew up without flourishing. As Linda Wagner quotes from Ellen Glasgow's notebooks: "I think it is almost impossible to over-estimate the part that that religion . . . has played in the lives of southern women. Nothing less could have made them accept with meekness the wing of the chicken and the double standard of morals."[14]

Although in Glasgow's novels the characters do not manifest strong beliefs to any specific confession (except the stern Presbyterians of Scotch-Irish breed in *Barren Ground* and *Vein of Iron*), attendance to religious services was an event of enormous social importance and a necessary part of women's cultural obligations. In *The Miller of Old Church*, the Reverend Orlando Mullen voices what the church considered as the proper place of a True Woman in one of his sermons: "No womanly woman cared to make a career. What the womanly woman desired was to remain an Incentive, an Ideal, an Aspiration." (*TMOC*, 130)

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[13] Myer, *Social Situation*, 30.
[14] Linda W. Wagner, *Ellen Glasgow: Beyond Convention* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982) 4.

Thus, the constraining social standard that regulated the proper sphere of genteel ladies in the South, together with its adjoining economic precariousness, had a strong support in the prevailing educational system available to young girls and in religious predicaments. They all helped in making all the womanly women become vulnerable creatures, utterly helpless and unable to cope with real life, while it crushed the desire to learn of ambitious women who, like Glasgow, found themselves trapped in the cosy but suffocating shelter of the domestic.

4. 'The Female Malady': Victorian Assumptions on Femininity and the Cult of Invalidism.

> *He likes us that way. He keeps us shut up in houses and tied up in clothes, and says it isn't proper for us to do anything to develop strength, and he only marries the weak ones.* [15]

Woman's dialogue with Mother Nature in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's story "Improving on Nature" is an aptly ironic portrait of the socio-politico-medical constraints placed upon upper- and middle-class women in the nineteenth century, the fin de siècle, and the first decades of the twentieth century. As this chapter seeks to illustrate, the overtly misogynistic attitude that permeated religious, social and medical predicaments in the Victorian period often pushed women into serious states of illness, chronic invalidism, or even serious mental disorders.

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[15] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "Improving on Nature", in Denise D. Knight ed., "*The Yellow Wallpaper" and Selected Short Stories of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* (London: Associated University Presses, 1994) 214.

According to the feminist scholar Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, the abyss that existed between the Victorian concepts of the True Woman and the Ideal Mother many times rendered women unable to reconcile the evident tensions between these two roles.[16] The True Woman was thought to be delicate, dependent and submissive; young women were always surrounded by a network of exclusively female relatives and friends, and their sphere was basically limited to home and church. As mothers, though, they were expected to run the household and its finances, provide moral and emotional support to the family, nurse children and elders, and frequently face severe bodily pain. Women were thus very likely to fall prey to several diseases and disorders that emerged as the logical result of exhaustion, childbearing and depression, but also as a consequence of a life of isolation and self-sacrifice. Edward Shorter significantly defines female bonding as "a culture of 'solace', a place where the bodily misery of womanhood would find understanding", but also as a means "to defend women from the malignant aggression of men."[17]

The cult of True Womanhood conveniently idealised maternity and defined the virtues of obedience, piety and passivity as essentially feminine, while it condemned the desire of an education or the practice of birth control as unnatural and dangerous to women and to the whole of society. Medical men of Victorian England and America consciously or unconsciously helped to justify gender roles and women's seclusion in the domestic on the grounds that their specific physiology made them slaves of their reproductive system. As women's ovaries presumably controlled their lives and their behaviour, genitals

[16] See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's '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.

[17] Edward Shorter, *A History of Women's Bodies* (London: Penguin, 1984) 292.

determined social roles, and doctors urged mothers to remind their daughters that any deviation from their 'natural' and legitimate functions as wives and mothers could ruin their health forever. Athena Vrettos remarks on the fact that advice books also helped both to naturalise and pathologise women's symptoms of ill health. By instructing women to be vigilant upon any "dangerous signs" in themselves and others, they socialised them into becoming "narcissistic watchdogs of their own symptoms while suggesting that they lacked . . . the capacity to solve the problems their own bodies 'naturally' created."[18] As Jill Matus also notes in *Unstable Bodies*, the manipulation and distortion of the concepts of nature/natural is crucial to the medical (and socio-political) discourse of the period: "[d]isputed constructions of 'nature' signal the cultural stakes involved in representations of sexual difference."[19]

The control of menstrual functions was therefore crucial to the proper development of female health, and the first crisis arrived with puberty. Physicians seemed to ignore the physical and psychological trauma the arrival of menstruation represented for girls who, accustomed to "the freedom of androgynous childhood", as Showalter puts it, found themselves imprisoned in long skirts and the restricting roles of the adult female. Physical exercise, study, and social life outside home and church were either strictly forbidden or severely curtailed, and physical and mental breakdown frequently appeared as a result of such strong social and sexual repression. As Showalter quotes from a Victorian doctor, "puberty, which gives man the knowledge of

[18] Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995) 24.

[19] Jill L. Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995) 8. Judith Butler similarly points that "gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which 'sexed nature' or 'natural sex' is produced and established as pre-discursive . . . the difference between nature and culture is always a function of culture." See Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990) 7.

greater power, gives to woman the conviction of her dependence."[20] Similarly, the end of women's reproductive period, like its beginning, implied a series of social and emotional conflicts that doctors could only translate as side-effects of the changes in women's reproductive organs. Doctors seldom listened to their patients' 'delusions', which may be easily interpreted as signs of the psychological terror of losing their sexual status in a social context that idealised maternity.

Social conventions, dressing codes,[21] dietary habits (girls were deprived from rich foods, as they were thought to induce masturbation), and heavy restrictions on physical exercise (skirts and petticoats made exercise impossible) consequently left women confined and repressed, often malnourished. Mothers and doctors hardly ever informed young girls about their menstrual cycles except for the warning that they would cause weakness and suffering. As Diane Price Herndl posits, the medical discourse of the period provided ambiguous and often contradictory definitions of womanhood, although it invariably stated the evidence of woman's inferiority and of her inherent weakness, which caused a natural proclivity to sickness:

> She was pure and sexual, innocent and guilty, capable of running a large household but incapable of professional work . . . encouraged by social mores to bear fewer children but condemned for using birth control or abortion, expected to maintain her social standing but risking her health by seeking too much pleasure or luxury. American culture and medicine made it clear, however, that she was in constant danger of illness and sure to experience much pain during her life. [22]

Showalter humorously comments that "[g]iven so shaky a constitution, it seemed a wonder that any woman could hope for a lifetime of sanity."[23] From puberty to menopause, reproductive cycles were

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[20] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago Press, 1987) 56-57.

[21] As Janet Beer and Ann Heilmann contend, "the physical confinement of women in unnatural and cramping clothes is only too apt a reflection of their cultural-conceptual immurement in injurious roles where they are forced to represent the extremes of Angel or Whore." See 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) 182.

[22] 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) 38.

[23] Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 56. Jill Matus similarly quotes a source of the period that reinforces Showalter's viewpoint: a Victorian physician stated that "[w]hen a woman, indeed, is notorious for her mind, she is in general frightfully ugly, and it is certain that great fecundity of the brain in women usually accompanies

thought to govern the rhythm of women's lives. Physicians embedded the Cult of True Womanhood into medical and scientific discourse, and any violation of that cult meant courting disease and death.

The ideal of True Womanhood and its adjoining Cult of Invalidism regarded women as angels of purity and innocence, and thus as necessarily 'less carnal' and physically weaker than men. Besides, middle-class women who displayed symptoms of emaciation showed their decorative status — and their husbands' wealth in being able to afford such an unproductive wife — as opposed to the large and fleshy working-class women. As a result, the notion that a true lady had to be petite and fragile in order to emphasise her angelic, bodiless, and passionless nature encouraged delicacy and an unnatural weakness in women. As Anne Douglas Wood observes,

> a sizable number of American women wanted or needed to consider themselves ill. Equally important, the self-diagnosis of these women was confirmed, even encouraged, by their society . . . Dewees, professor of midwifery at the University of Pennsylvania in the early part of the nineteenth century, stated in his standard work on the diseases of females that woman was subject to twice the sicknesses that affected man just because she has a womb.[24]

Control of food intake was crucial in achieving this appearance of sickly loveliness, so fasting and vomiting were common practices among young women of the period, who wished (and imperiously needed) to appear attractive to the male gaze. In her introduction to *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, Anna Krugovoy Silver observes that

> the erotic appeal of a woman's small waist derives from her physical weakness and vulnerability, especially when juxtaposed with man's strength. Symbolically, the waist signifies woman's ethereal nature, the aerial qualities that separate her from man; a woman's light weight suggests her spiritual, rather than carnal, nature. Her "angelic" nature is thus reflected in her weak, slight body . . . they understood her weakness and invalidism, demonstrated by her lack of appetite, as closely connected to a hyperbolic femininity. [25]

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sterility or disorder of the matrix." Matus, *Unstable Bodies,* 41. [quoted from A. Walker, *Woman Physiologically Considered as to Mind, Morals, Marriage, Matrimonial Slavery, Infidelity and Divorce* (London: Baily, 1840) 42-43.]

[24] Ann Douglas Wood, '"The Fashionable Diseases": Women's Complaints and their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America', in Mary S. Hartman and Lois Banner, eds., *Clio's Consciousness Raised: New Perspectives on the History of Women* (New York: Octagon Books, 1976) 2-3.

[25] Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 44.

As has been mentioned before, fashion and dress codes, especially the use of corsets and the practice of tight-lacing,[26] lack of exercise and fresh air, and an inadequate (and many times insufficient) diet seriously impaired women's health. This often resulted in illnesses like anaemia, tuberculosis, or anorexia. Anorexia nervosa was diagnosed by Charles Lasègue and Sir William Withey Gull in 1873, but the American doctor William Stout Chipley had already coined the term 'sitomania' in 1859 to define a fear of eating. According to Silver, though, "archival research suggests that anorexia nervosa existed as early as the 1820s."[27] The literature of the period and art in general also encouraged the patriarchal notion that viewed slenderness and illness as the attributes of the pure, saintly, and selfless woman. In literature, for example, Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1845) and a number of Hawthorne's short stories identify the female body as the outward expression of a woman's virtue. Bram Dijkstra also points out that the origins of anorexia nervosa and other related disorders are to be found in women's attempts to conform to the morbidly attractive ideal of the sublime consumptive:

> [m]any [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, which gives the sufferer a false sense of virtuous self-control, 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."[28]

As has been illustrated, several critics and scholars have defined the invalid or convalescent woman as an extreme version — or, as Smith-Rosenberg puts it, "a stark caricature"[29] — of patriarchal notions of femininity. The figure of the invalid both exemplifies the romantic ideal of woman as body and nature (as opposed to man as mind and civilisation) and endorses the Victorian cult of True Womanhood that views women as weak, delicate and dependent. Having dealt with the way in which medical men of

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[26] Ibid., 36. As Silver notes, "the corset . . . is a visible marker of the culture of anorexia. The corset both demonstrates the cultural imperative to be slim and constitutes the method by which women approximated that imperative: throughout the century, women re-shaped their bodies, particularly their waists, to conform to normative standards of beauty."

[27] Ibid., 2.

[28] Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986) 29.

[29] Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 207.

Victorian England and America helped to solidify masculine privilege and validate the doctrine of separate spheres, it now seems appropriate to consider the changes that took place in terms of new medical theories and social mores during the second half of the nineteenth century, the fin de siècle, and the first decades of the twentieth century. These changes influenced conceptions of women and, more specifically, of sick women.

As Price Herndl observes, the decade of the 1840s marks the beginning of the establishment of professional (male) doctors in British and America, and the gradual depiction of women as increasingly weak and sickly, sick enough to need a doctor at all times. The 1840s also saw the emergence of the struggle for women's rights and demands of equality for both sexes (the Seneca Falls convention was held in 1848), as well as the rise of domestic novels and social movements which advocated for the status of women as moral guardians of household and family. Albeit essentially divergent, both discourses rejected the patriarchal assumption that women were 'naturally' prone to illness and invalidism.[30]

Although domesticity and feminism were obviously opposed in most issues, both movements attempted to reshape social definitions of womanhood and envisioned strong and healthy women who could be capable of coping with responsibilities. Domestic novels reveal that women become invalid or deranged because of male betrayal, not because of inherent weakness, and expose their powerlessness against male control. Nevertheless, the fact that they privilege female moral power only within the private sphere restricts women to the domestic and, given their subjection to patriarchal rule, it ultimately questions whether they can really succeed in taking control of their households and serve as moral examples to their families. As Price Herndl perceives,

> [t]he domestic discourse that would set up an institution in which women and justice would reign is threatened by a discourse declaring women too weak to hold such power. The power of the medicopolitical ideology of the male middle class proves strong enough to render domestic ideology inconsistent. [31]

The feminist discourse disagreed with the domestic doctrine of separate spheres and claimed that women were not only strong enough to manage their households, but also to succeed in college education and in the public arena. Throughout the 1880s and towards the turn of the century, increasing numbers of

[30] Price Herndl also contemplates this aspect. See *Invalid Women*, 17.

[31] Ibid., 62.

women rejected the stereotype of the invalid woman as an icon of aesthetically pleasing womanly perfection, and the cultivation of ill health as "a kind of cosmetic art."[32] Women of the fin de siècle saw themselves as fit to occupy positions of responsibility outside the home, but found themselves torn between their personal and professional aspirations and the roles imposed by Victorian stereotypes of femininity. The more women refused to become passive and defeated invalids, the more physicians warned them against the dangers of abandoning their proper sphere.

In her preface to *Love's Madness*, Helen Small notes that in the course of the nineteenth century "the representative figure of madness ceased to be the madman in chains" that had pervaded the eighteenth century. Instead, it became "the woman whose insanity was an extension of her female condition."[33] Similarly, the second half of the nineteenth century — and specially the fin de siècle — experienced an enormous increase of upper- and middle-class women as psychiatric patients.[34] At the same time that doctors established an exclusively male monopoly on the treatment of the new 'female maladies', women were denied access to higher education in general and to the medical profession in particular.

Patriarchal attitudes towards women pervaded medical theories among psychiatrists: as they suspected, women were more prone to mental instability because their reproductive cycles were intimately connected to their brains, and any irregularity in those processes could cause symptoms of insanity to emerge. However, according to many physicians, the lack of a proper education or a meaningful occupation in life was partly to blame for women's mental breakdown. Despite their divergences, all of them agreed that women's weak constitution was its primary cause, and none of them ever considered the social context in which Victorian women lived or listened to how they felt.

In order to recapture the actual experiences of these women in *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter provides examples from the letters and journals of Florence Nightingale. She also draws on the gloomy world of the third storey Charlotte Brontë recreates in *Jane Eyre*, which Gilbert and Gubar recover to represent female anger and

[32] Ibid., 111. Bram Dijkstra also observes the aesthetic and erotic connotations of female invalidism in the Victorian period. See Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity,* 29.

[33] Helen Small, *Love's Madness: Medicine, the Novel, and Female Insanity, 1800-1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) vii.

[34] 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*, 51-74.

desire, as well as the wish of the woman writer to escape male houses and male-shaped fiction.[35] Bertha Mason recalls psychiatric beliefs that madness is rooted in the reproductive system, and hence it is transmitted from mother to daughter. In Rochester's view, her disorder renders her a monster of insatiate and promiscuous sexual activity. In turn, Nightingale suffered from terrible crises of mental depression, until she gathered enough energy to leave home and start a career as a professional nurse. After her own unnerving experiences, she believed that middle-class Victorian women, especially those who were unmarried, needed to find work and same-sex companionship in order not to feel redundant and abnormal. As Showalter chronicles in *The Female Malady*, a shallow education often resulted in intellectual vacuity and moral starvation. The boredom and dependence domestic life entailed, Nightingale argues, gradually brings passivity, frustration, irritability and illness:

> the medical belief that the instability of the female nervous and reproductive systems made women more vulnerable to derangement than men had extensive consequences for social policy. It was used as a reason to keep women out of the professions, to deny them political rights, and to keep them under male control in the family and the state. Thus medical and political policies were mutually reinforcing. As women's demands became increasingly problematic for Victorian society as a whole, the achievements of the psychiatric profession in managing women's minds would offer both a mirror of cultural attitudes and a model for other institutions. [36]

The appearance of the New Woman represented a direct challenge to Victorian assumptions of female dependence. While new perspectives of a college education and a fulfilling occupation in the public arena were gradually opening to young women, doctors insisted that such ambitions could lead to a tragic succession of nervous disorders. Victorian psychiatrists contemplated female inferiority as a natural

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[35] Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress', in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) pp. 336-371.
[36] Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 73.

consequence of evolution, since reproductive processes drained women's energies to the extent of impairing their intellectual capacities. Thus, sexual differences in the body, doctors advocated, also pervaded the mind. As Ornella Moscucci notes in *The Science of Woman*, "over the century, a number of gynaecological treatments were devised for the purpose of managing women's minds."[37] In the same way women were physically constituted to give birth, they were also mentally formed for motherhood: their innate qualities of patience, empathy and self-sacrifice both fulfilled their nature and served the needs of society. Sanctioning female domesticity and dependence — with its adjoining qualities of sympathy, nurturance and self-sacrifice — in terms of evolutionary theories of reproductive specialisation thus became crucial to ensure male comfort and the continuity of the status quo.

Attempting to defy nature and struggling to be man's equal instead of his complement would surely result in mental breakdown. Disorders such as anorexia or hysteria were indeed common: through illness, women perhaps physically manifested the internal conflict between their own individual desires and the external pressures to submit to the model of dutiful wife, mother or daughter. Psychiatrists, though, attributed the symptoms of the newly termed 'female maladies' to the traits traditionally associated with the feminine nature: while starving anorexics seemed to enact the most extreme version of the self-sacrificing wife and daughter, the alternative periods of sobbing, laughing, fainting and vomiting of the hysterical woman became exaggerated manifestations of the mutability and capriciousness of the female psyche. It was certainly much easier to mystify hysterical women as a symbol of hyper-femininity and continue to see them as "lovelorn Ophelias"[38] than to understand their longings for

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[37] Ornella Moscucci, *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England, 1800-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 105.

intellectual fulfilment, greater autonomy and control of their lives. The same can be applied to anorexic girls: "[w]hen only the body was regarded as important, anorexic girls paraded physical starvation as a way of drawing attention to the starvation of their mental and moral faculties."[39]

Hence, one of the best defences of patriarchal culture against the attacks of its "rebellious daughters" was to label their efforts to gain access to university education and their campaigns in favour of female suffrage as consequences of mental derangement. The studies on hysteria conducted by Freud and Breuer deviated from the Victorian psychiatrists' belief that a rebellion against traditional gender roles was pathological *per se*, and observed that the repetitive and constraining roles to which women were hopelessly confined could ultimately result in nervous disorders. Nevertheless, Freud failed — as most of his colleagues had failed — to understand his patients' message and the enormous impact of their social circumstances. Instead, he persevered in seeking occult sexual desires and repressions in the patients' stories and insisted on having the last word. Despite the substantial advance psychoanalytic therapy entailed in the treatment of mental illnesses, Freud's wish to impose his authority and assert his intellectual superiority blinded him to see the social conflicts underlying his patients' mental disorders. As Anne Williams contends in *Art of Darkness*,[40] Freud acknowledged the reality and the power of those female forces Western culture had excluded: sexuality, non-linguistic meanings, madness, dreams. Although he was conscious of the plight of madwomen, he still attempted to keep them locked in their attics and well under control.

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[38] Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 132.

[39] Ibid., 128. Anna Krugovoy Silver also remarks on the Victorian equation of anorexic emaciation and an extreme performance of selfless femininity. See Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*, 44.

[40] Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of the Gothic* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 239-249.

As Smith-Rosenberg among others posits,[41] the hysterical woman became a symbol of women's passive reluctance to adapt to the requirements that society demanded of them. Hysteria came to be considered as the quintessentially 'female malady', and cases of hysteria[42] were widespread among middle-class women in Victorian England and America. In *Love's Madness*, Helen Small aptly remarks that

> until the second half of the twentieth century, [hysteria] could claim to have been the feminine performative disease *par excellence*. It was, above all, a disease whose meaning was as culturally and historically specific as that of femininity itself.[43]

During the decade of the 1840s and until the 1890s, medical theories that sanctioned women's proper place within the domestic were, at their best, contradictory. Some doctors maintained that spending too much effort in activities like reading or physical exercise left women's bodies drained of energy, which was essential for the correct functioning of the reproductive organs, while others acknowledged that the lack of active pursuits in life made them an easy prey to boredom, melancholy and disease. Invalidism, illness, or madness was thus believed to be woman's inescapable destiny, both when her health was dominated by changes in her reproductive organs, and when she rebelled against her nature (and the apparent demands of these organs) and refused her appointed role as wife and mother. As Edward Shorter quotes from Catharine Beecher's *Letters to the People on Health and Happiness* (1855), the decline in health among middle-class women seemed to reach epidemic proportions in Victorian America, especially during the second half of the nineteenth century:

[41] See Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct*, 197-217.
[42] It is worth noting that, at the time, a wide range of physical and psychological disorders (from menstrual pain to migraines to depression) could be classified as symptoms of hysteria.
[43] Small, *Love's Madness*, 17.

> I have nine married sisters and sisters-in-law, all of them delicate or invalids, except two. I have fourteen married female cousins, and not one of them but is either delicate, often ailing, or an invalid . . . In Boston I cannot remember but one female friend who is perfectly healthy.[44]

Here Beecher significantly points at marriage as the onset of a period of disease and invalidism. To my mind, Beecher also seems to reveal women's entrapment within conventional patriarchal strictures as the main source of their *dis*-ease. In addition to the physical causes of illness, invalidism could have had a psychological basis. For a housewife educated for sacrifice and selflessness, illness offered a means to get the attention and comfort she was expected to provide but not to receive herself. It also demanded sexual abstinence and thus provided a convenient method to avoid the threat of multiple childbirths. Moreover, women's socialisation into a role of dependence and submission did not leave many viable alternatives to express dissatisfaction with their restricted role. Illness could therefore become a fashionable outlet to women's anger against male domination within a socially acceptable frame, and at the same time a way to appear attractive to the male gaze.[45]

> Fiction of the period also helped to solidify the belief that the pale and helpless invalid represented a model of pure, almost saintly loveliness. While women writers (both feminist and domestic) were trying to put forward their ideas and redefine the role of women inside and outside the home, male writers responded with an emphasis on the invalid, even the dead woman as the literary canon for female aesthetics. Diane Price Herndl illustrates her discussion of male visions of the female invalid with short stories and novels by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe, whose descriptions of sickly and ethereal young maids insist on the romantic identification of woman as body and nature, as opposed to man as reason and science.[46]

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[44] Shorter, *A History of Women's Bodies*, 276. Bram Dijkstra also points at the same fact in *Idols of Perversity*, 25-26, 29.

[45] For example, Price Herndl contemplates this possibility in *Invalid Women*, 23-30.

[46] For a thorough analysis on this issue, see Diane Price Herndl's chapter 3, '(Super)'Natural' Invalidism: Male Writers and the Mind/Body Problem' in *Invalid Women*, 75-110.

In stories like Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" or Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher", both Hawthorne and Poe attempted to achieve a new union of mind and body but finally surrendered to patriarchal definitions of womanhood. Through their female protagonists, whom they portray as angels of virtue, these authors reveal their fear of a female power that is not natural but supernatural, the source of some diabolical force that eventually pervades these stories and results in Gothic horror. Hawthorne's and Poe's saintly heroines are defined mostly in terms of body, although they possess remarkable intellects (consider, for instance, Beatrice in "Rappaccini's Daughter"). In their attempt at uniting body and mind, both writers reveal medico-social views on women and male fears of female potential: if women could cultivate their minds without ruining their bodies, not only were medical predicaments wrong, but the whole basis of separate spheres was threatened. A secure means to solve this conflict was to transform potentially powerful females into socially acceptable invalids, thus putting them on the side of body and nature and consequently invalidating both their bodies and minds. Although Hawthorne's and Poe's fiction evidences that women are made to suffer as a consequence of male abuse, death proves the best alternative to eliminate the threat of female power and validate the notion that female charm (even eroticism) is equated to sickliness and — more disturbingly — death.

This was true not only in male fiction but in medical treatises: as Anne Williams argues, in Freud's history cases the female plays the traditional role in the male Gothic: dark, unknowable, infinitely mysterious, passive, defective, always potentially hysterical.[47] Edward Shorter also highlights the fact that Victorian medical discourse reproduced male fears and anxieties about women's sexuality: "since Hyppocrates, academic medicine had assigned to the uterus bizarre qualities . . . Male phobias about

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[47] Williams, *Art of Darkness*, 239-249.

the menses are as old as time and known in virtually every society on record."[48] As Athena Vrettos similarly observes,[49] male physicians and advice books drew upon the fiction of the period in their mystification of the nervous female patient. Paradoxically, doctors had helped to create the very mystery they attempted to decipher.

Everywhere a nineteenth-century woman looked, she found herself surrounded by images of sickly (or dead) young women portrayed as icons of feminine beauty. Not only the literature of the period but visual arts, as Bram Dijkstra notes, took the dead or dead/sleeping beauty as one of their most popular subjects. Shakespeare's Ophelia and Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, obsessively portrayed by Pre-Raphaelite artists like Dante Gabriel Rossetti or John Everett Millais, exemplified the most extreme version of passive femininity, revealing an erotic potential that borders on the necrophiliac, which proves especially frightening to a twenty-first century female reader.[50] Even Opera mimicked these values: in Puccini's works, for instance, the sweetly consumptive Mimi in *La Bohème* (1896) or the innocent and submissive Cio-Cio-San in *Madame Butterfly* (1904) similarly equate illness, and even death (for love, of course) with True Womanhood.

Despite increasing evidence that women could occupy places in the public sphere without risking their health, doctors still favoured the doctrine of separate spheres, but late nineteenth-century physicians shifted their emphasis from physical to mental

[48] Shorter, *A History of Women's Bodies*, 286-287.
[49] Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions*, 26.
[50] Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 25-26. As Dijkstra states, "throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, parents, sisters, daughters, and loving friends were kept busy on canvases everywhere, anxiously nursing wan, hollow-eyed beauties who were on the verge of death. For many a Victorian husband his wife's physical weakness came to be evidence to the world and to God of her physical and mental purity. The fin de siècle . . . exploits and romanticises the notion of woman as a permanent, a necessary, even a "natural" invalid. It was an image which in the second half of the nineteenth century came to control and not infrequently destroy the lives of countless European and American women. More and more the mythology of the day began to associate even normal health – let alone "unusual" physical vigour in women – with dangerous, masculinizing attitudes. . . . Proper human angels were weak, helpless, ill."

diseases. The "closed energy"[51] model which, as has been mentioned, served medical men of the 1840s to justify gender role division was being replaced by new medical models and newly discovered mental illnesses. Thus, in many ways, psychology came to substitute gynaecology as the main instrument of medical science to perpetuate female inferiority.[52]

As Price Herndl quotes from various sources of the period, doctors were fascinated with mental disorders, and the second half of the nineteenth century experimented an important rise in the diagnosis of several illnesses labelled under the general term 'nervousness'. This fascination, Price Herndl points out, was followed by Freud's development of psychoanalysis in Vienna at the turn of the century. While the newly named "neurasthenia" was viewed in men as a result of their demanding role in society and the responsibilities that hard intellectual work entailed, "nervousness", "neurasthenia" and "hysteria" were often interchangeable terms that accounted for female inability to cope with roles outside the home. The popularisation of Freud's psychoanalytic theories of fear of castration and penis-envy in England and America transformed woman into not-man, thus defining her as "other" and "lacking". Simultaneously, affectionate bonds between women were regarded with suspicion, as

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[51] Ornella Moscucci provides an apt definition of this medical theory in *The Science of Woman*. She quotes eminent doctors of the period, such as Edward Clarke or Henry Maudsley, who used it to argue against women's demands for education, on the grounds that it could cause irreparable menstrual – and mental – disorders: "the body was a closed system in which organs and mental faculties competed for a finite supply of physical or mental energy; thus stimulation or depletion in one organ resulted in exhaustion or excitation in another part of the body." See Moscucci, *The Science of Woman*, 104.

[52] Against the apparently unanimous opinion among women historians that doctors consciously or unconsciously manifested their misogyny in their treatment of 'female maladies', Regina Morantz interestingly provides a dissenting opinion on this subject: "several historians have suggested that nineteenth-century American physicians were hostile to their female patients and that their animosity was expressed in the painful and ineffective therapy they administered . . . The aversion of doctors to women has been presumed with little effort to locate clinical procedures within the context of nineteenth-century medical therapeutics . . . The answer lies, not in their antipathy to women, but in ignorance, poor training, and the historical context within which they thought and worked." See Regina Morantz, 'The Lady and her Physician', in Mary S. Hartman and Lois Banner, eds., *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, 39,47. Helen Small also theorises on this issue in chapter 2 of her book. See Small, 'Love-Mad Women and the Rhetoric of Gentlemanly Medicine' in *Love's Madness*, pp. 33-71.

they could potentially lead to homosexuality.[53] Physicians often suggested a return to domesticity as a cure to female disorders. For instance, S. Weir Mitchell's (in)famous "rest cure" attempted to restore women's health by increasing the patient's food intake and restricting her physical, mental and social activity to a minimum. Mitchell's endeavour to cure female insanity by returning women to their allotted role as mere bodies is, as Price Herndl describes it, "an almost parodic exaggeration of domesticity."[54]

Mitchell's "rest cure" is an example of the strong emphasis doctors placed on women's bodies in order to regulate their minds — a fact that reveals how medical discourse was influenced by the enormous symbolic meaning of the female body in nineteenth-century culture. Thus, women with intellectual or artistic aspirations who were denied the right to develop them might have turned to their own bodies (their highest value in Victorian society, especially in the marriage market) as their only means to transform something into an artistic creation. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, illness was one of the few legitimate ways to do so, since illness was equated with loveliness and the active young woman "experience[d] education in docility, submissiveness, and selflessness as in some sense sickening. To be trained in renunciation is almost necessarily to be trained in ill health."[55]

If illness was viewed as a cosmetic art[56] during that period, then a woman could have made herself sick in order to express herself and achieve some control, at least over her own body. The question remains whether a woman's manipulation of her ill health is either a resistance to the constricting roles of domesticity or an acquiescence to male

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[53] Feminist attacks to this popularised version of Freud's theories, mostly regarding penis-envy and the Oedipus Complex, are thoroughly discussed in Juliet Mitchell's ground-breaking work *Psychoanalysis and Feminism: A Radical Reassessment of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin, 1986).
[54] Price Herndl, *Invalid Women*, 116-118.

[55] Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 124.
[56] See footnote 18.

definitions of women. Most feminist criticism argues that illness was a consequence of patriarchal oppression; that the doctrine of passivity, selflessness and submissiveness imposed on women from adolescence destroyed both their physical and mental health. However, other voices (among others, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Elaine Showalter, quoted in previous pages) have claimed that invalidism could also be a way of redefining woman's status within the domestic and liberating her from the pressing demands of home, husband and children.

French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous[57] have understood the cultural icon of the madwoman as not only resisting sexist stereotypes of womanhood but also as attempting to create artistic ways of self-expression which, by virtue of being different, are defined as 'other' and 'mad'. However, it is my belief that both the invalid and the madwoman are above all victims of patriarchy. Even the tyrannical invalids that Glasgow portrays in some of her novels, who rule their households under an appearance of delicacy, have achieved their power at the highly cost of losing their health and their sense of self. Helen Small significantly observes that the feminist celebration of the hysterical woman "risks culpably reinscribing women in precisely the debilitating gender constructions feminism might hope to free them from" since it identifies them "once again with irrationality, silence, nature, and body." She also points at the destructive effects of sickness by noting that "hysteria and depression have been far from liberating for most . . . women."[58]

Women writers of the period reproduced this conflict in their works of fiction, sometimes recollecting painful episodes from their own experience of insanity. In her

[57] Hélène Cixous, *The Hélène Cixous Reader*, Susan Sellers, ed. (London: Routledge, 1997); Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[58] Small, *Love's Madness*, 27.

novella *The Awakening*, for instance, Glasgow's fellow Southerner Kate Chopin provides a fictional portrait of what Showalter has defined as "female malady". Similarly, one of the best-known narratives of female invalidism, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", serves as an example of how socio-medical pressures hinder personal aspirations to the point of turning a creative woman into a madwoman (or vice versa?).[59] The protagonist of "The Yellow Wallpaper" is willing to lead an active life as a writer but is instead locked in a room of a country house by prescription of her doctor-husband. She repeatedly voices her discontent at this enforced "rest cure" and makes several attempts at writing when she is not being watched, but her husband apparently knows better and forbids her to do so. She becomes gradually obsessed with her room's wallpaper and eventually distinguishes the outline of a woman (we assume, her reflection as in a mirror) trapped among its shapes. At the end of the story, she tears off the paper in order to liberate all the women she sees behind the paper pattern: the story closes with an image of the protagonist crawling over the unconscious body of her husband. Chris Wiesenthal interestingly remarks on the paper's function as a metaphor of the author's "delirious discourse", which he identifies as "the very symptom of madness so markedly *absent* in the curiously coherent style of Gilman's increasingly disturbed, journal-writing protagonist."[60] Wiesenthal's statement suggests that fiction can function as a dialogue between health and sanity, thus providing writers (and readers) with a strategy to articulate their own contradictions.

Since Gilman was able to exorcise her own mental problems through the fictional re-creation of an *alter ego* who succumbs to madness, the "writing cure" that helped Gilman recover her health could have coincided with Freud's development of the

[59] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "*The Yellow Wallpaper" and Selected Short Stories of Charlotte Perkins Gilman*, Denise D. Knight ed. (London: Associated University Presses, 1994).

[60] Chris Wiesenthal, *Figuring Madness in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1997) 9. [emphasis in original]

"talking cure", through which patients could get rid of their anxieties by talking about them. By creating a surrogate invalid figure who suffers from a nervous breakdown and cannot recover from it, Gilman symbolically killed her own "angel in the house" and regained her lost health, while she exposed the few options left to women artists like herself to escape the constraints of patriarchal structures.[61] In "The Yellow Wallpaper", Gilman portrayed the evils of a sickened-sickening society that makes women invalid and insane. Her protagonist transforms her illness into a means to rebel against social norms, and somehow escape (if only partially and momentarily) male control. However, as I have contended before, this apparent sense of control over one's own body is counter-productive, since it inevitably leads to self-destruction. As Ann Douglas Wood posits, "she has won at the cost of becoming what he [her husband] subconsciously sought to make her — a creeping creature, an animal and an automaton."[62]

As Price Herndl notes, at the turn of the nineteenth century and during the first two decades of the twentieth century, Freud theorised that some mental disorders and their symptoms could be intentional and that they could be used as a weapon (especially a female weapon) to attain certain privileges. The New Thought philosophies, very fashionable in the United States at the turn of the century, also viewed illness as a question of individual will. Female invalidism became no longer a desirable state but a punishment: a consequence of isolation, overwork, or abuse, as well as a wilful attempt to gain power in the domestic sphere.[63] Medical practices during the first decades of the

[61] Price Herndl also comments on this issue in *Invalid Women*, 137.
[62] Wood, ''The Fashionable Diseases': Women's Complaints and their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America', 12.

[63] For a more thorough analysis of this period and a detailed explanation of New Thought theories see, for example, chapter 5 in Price Herndl's *Invalid Women*, 'Fighting (with) Illness: Success and the Invalid Woman', pp. 150-184.

twentieth century — among them, the discovery of bacteria and the development of germ theories — helped to change the image of illness, and those changes worked (at least partly) to women's advantage: illness was no longer thought fashionable and attractive. However, medical men insisted on women's need to stay in their proper sphere, although this time for reasons other than their innate weakness.

> Late Victorian psychiatrists, influenced by Darwin's theories on eugenics and by Freud's new therapies based in psychoanalysis, insisted on women's position of inferiority. The New Thought philosophy, asserting the importance of will to cure illnesses, together with Social Darwinism's emphasis on genetics, shifted illness and invalidism from elegant drawing rooms to poor slums, fostering the belief that invalid and poor people were either genetically or psychologically weak and sickly. The threat of germs and the female responsibility to preserve her own and her family's health became a new reason for preventing women's increasing demands of political representation and equal opportunities in the professional world. Domestic work thus became the main reason to keep women within the boundaries of the domestic, not "because they were too weak to do anything else but because there was no time to do anything else." As Price Herndl notes, although the relationship between illness and femininity had changed, "what remained . . . was the constant threat of illness for women and the assurance that strict modes of behaviour could save them."[64]

A young writer growing up in Victorian America, and educated in the genteel tradition of the Old South, Glasgow brilliantly portrayed the tragedy of woman condemned to an unproductive life and deprived of the moral and emotional support of other women. Her major works of fiction provide one of the best examples of how the private, the domestic and the regional moves into the universal and voices the inarticulate stories of women across two continents. The silent protest of invalidism and neuralgia against the crushing demands of society, and the desire to relate with other female selves without loss of identity (and mental health) constitutes one of the main concerns in Glasgow's fiction. However, I believe it is worth insisting on the fact that although mental disorders can be viewed as a form of proto-feminist rebellion, they were caused by patriarchal strictures and — most importantly — they were ultimately self-destructive.

From very early on Glasgow rebelled against the conventional modes of feminine behaviour and thought imposed by her social class, while she developed a strong

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[64] Ibid., 161, 164.

resilience against the sentimental stories of glorified aristocratic past that dominated the regional fiction at that time. From the very beginning of her creative life, she rejected Victorian definitions of femininity pervading the social attitudes of her day. She used realism and irony to create a new Southern fiction which would replace that sentimental tradition although, as she admits in her autobiography, "I had been brought up in the midst of it; I was a part of it, or it was a part of me" (*WW*, 104). On the surface, Glasgow led a conventional life for a woman of her social class: she appeared to be a wealthy and eccentric spinster of the privileged elite, travelling, throwing gala parties, pampering her pets, and writing novels. Of her nineteen novels, many follow stylistic and thematic precedents set by earlier generations of domestic writers, but those novels grew out of a mind that rebelled against social and intellectual convention.

Price Herndl quotes one of Ellen Glasgow's most remarkable novels, *Barren Ground*, to illustrate the woman writer's attempts to envision a productive and successful life for a woman that does not depend on love and marriage.[65] The heroine in *Barren Ground*, Dorinda Oakley, succeeds in the masculine world of farming after her lover's desertion, a miscarriage, and a period of poverty and invalidism in New York. While she succeeds professionally and eventually buys her former lover's property, all the women who stay in their proper sphere end up as invalids, and all of them finally die. Through Dorinda's experience, Glasgow provides evidence that those (both men and women) who are trapped in feminine roles and condemned to the unproductive lives women have traditionally led fall prey to invalidism and death. As I will try to demonstrate throughout the following sections, her fiction effectively shows the sickening aspects of Victorian patriarchy, namely that traditional masculinity kills (symbolically or literally) and that relationships within a community of women are far more rewarding.

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[65] Ibid., 181-183.

5. Ellen Through the Looking-Glass: the Female Invalid as Metaphor in some of Glasgow's Works of Fiction.

5.1. First Impressions: *The Wheel of Life* (1906), *The Ancient Law* (1908) and *The Miller of Old Church* (1911).

Summary of the Novels Discussed in this Section:

- ***The Wheel of Life* (1906)**

The poet-protagonist Laura Wilde has led a secluded life with her elderly uncle Percival and her invalid aunt Angela. Laura yearns for adventure and passion, since she believes that she cannot be a "true" poet until she has experienced the ardour of romance. She goes to New York to meet her lifelong friend Gerty Bridewell, who introduces her to her husband's cousin Arnold Kemper. During Laura's engagement to the unworthy Kemper (which she eventually breaks), she also learns that Gerty's marriage to Perry is a failure, although Gerty does her best to conceal her husband's infidelities and maintain a façade of happiness. Connie, the wife of Laura's editor Roger Adams, resorts to alcoholism, narcotics abuse, and endless lovers as outlets for her frustration. She finally dies while undergoing surgery, which allows for the potential union between Laura and Roger that is suggested at the end of the novel.

- ***The Ancient Law* (1908)**

The hero Daniel Ordway is released from prison after having served a sentence for financial fraud. His invalid wife Lydia and his spoilt daughter Alice have disowned him and now live with Daniel's father. His aristocratic family in Botetourt County also reject him because of his ex-convict status, so he decides to start a new life in the rural area of the Tappahannock. When Alice marries an unworthy man and forges a signature to pay

for a fur coat, he assumes the responsibility for it and his past is revealed. Since his political aspirations in the Tappahannock area are ruined, he goes back to the family mansion at Botetourt only to find himself a misfit. Upon his return, Daniel's beautiful and ice-cold wife Lydia uses her invalidism as a convenient shelter to prevent her husband's approaches.

- ***The Miller of Old Church* (1911)**

The novel is set in the rural area of the Southside, where the lives of three families are intertwined, together with their intricate past of secret tragedies. It starts with the arrival of handsome and dandyish Jonathan Gay, who comes to visit his invalid mother Angela and his unmarried aunt Kesiah. The wealthy and sophisticated Gay family live in the stately mansion of 'Jordan's Journey', and old Reuben Merryweather lives in the overseer's cottage with his granddaughter Molly. The Gays are linked to the Merryweathers through Molly: Angela's brother-in-law Jonathan Gay made Reuben's daughter Janet pregnant and then deserted her, which drove her to despair and death. The young Jonathan repeats his uncle's mistake and secretly marries Blossom Revercomb only to desert her when Molly receives her father's inheritance and becomes a suitable match. Blossom's uncle, the prosperous young miller Abel Revercomb, provides the title to the novel, but the main plot actually circles around his love story with Molly.

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The relation of woman to man was dwarfed suddenly by an understanding of the relation of woman to woman. Deeper than the dependence on sex, simpler, more natural, closer to the earth, as though it still drew its strength from the soil, . . . the need of woman for woman was not written in the songs nor in the histories of men, but in the neglected and frustrated lives which the songs and the histories of men had ignored. (TMOC, 410)

The first two decades of the twentieth century marked the development of Glasgow's philosophy of life, which she would transmit through her works of fiction. During those years, Glasgow transfers the initial New York setting of *The Descendant* (1897) and *Phases of an Inferior Planet* (1898) to her native Virginia. Likewise, she ceases to portray the independent male and female professionals of her first two novels and starts to concentrate her attention on the genteel ladies that had surrounded her early life in Richmond. *The Miller of Old Church* (1911) is of remarkable interest as regards my analysis, since it indicates the author's gradual shift in focus towards Southern women and their emotional lives, whose plight was to become the core of her most acclaimed novels. In *The Miller of Old Church* Glasgow examines the consequences of the Victorian cult of invalidism, as well as women's bonding as opposed to male-female relationships, themes that she had explored to a lesser degree in previous novels.

Prior to *The Miller of Old Church*, Glasgow's less popular novels *The Wheel of Life* (1906) and *The Ancient Law* (1908) hint at Glasgow's change in

this direction. The first sketches for Glasgow's later strong heroines, and especially for her memorable tyrannical invalids, are to be found in these two early novels, which most critics consider a flaw in Glasgow's artistic career. Blair Rouse, for example, asserts that "*The Wheel of Life* and *The Ancient Law* are inferior to those novels which had immediately preceded them." He contends that both novels are "inferior to most of Ellen Glasgow's other fiction and represent interruptions in her development as a novelist."[66] Marcelle Thiebaux agrees with Rouse and classifies *The Ancient Law* as "a minor work", and notes that the novel "received little acclaim, popular or critical."[67] Nevertheless, I believe both novels deserve to be mentioned, since they are significant as regards the development of the author's attitude towards female invalidism and traditional notions of femininity at large.

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The Wheel of Life is still set in New York.[68] Its protagonist Laura Wilde, however, has always lived in an isolated house with her bachelor uncle Percival and her old invalid aunt Angela. As a quite successful poet in her thirties whose life has been spent in seclusion and introversion, Laura yearns for adventure and passion. She believes that she cannot be a "true" poet until she has experienced the ardour of heterosexual love, and thus identifies romance with "life." She goes

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[66] Blair Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962) 22 and 62.
[67] Marcelle Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1982) 85.
[68] Most critics agree on the fact that Glasgow started to produce her best fiction when she centred the plot in her native Virginia. For example, Louis Auchincloss asserts that the only flaw in *Barren Ground*, considered to be her best novel, can be found in the chapters that deal with the protagonist's stay in New York. He thus regards Glasgow's first novels as a failure since, among other reasons, "the Manhattan setting is, as usual, fatal to Miss Glasgow's fiction." See Louis Auchincloss, *Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965) 77.

to New York to meet her lifelong friend Gerty Bridewell, who introduces her to her husband Perry's distant cousin Arnold Kemper. Glasgow unfolds the story of Laura's engagement to the unworthy Kemper (which she eventually breaks) together with that of her friend's married life. Laura learns that Gerty's marriage to Perry is a failure, although Gerty does her best to conceal her husband's infidelities and maintain a façade of happiness. Her obsession with clothes, dieting, and keeping up with Perry's mistresses evidences the loss of self and the competitive relationships between women that conventional marriage involves. Glasgow provides an even gloomier example of the destructive effects of women's entrapment within the domestic through Connie, the wife of Laura's editor Roger Adams. Aside from displaying a hysterical behaviour, Connie's outlets to her frustrating life include alcoholism, abuse of narcotics, and endless lovers. She finally dies while undergoing surgery, which allows for the potential union between Laura and Roger that is suggested at the end of the novel.

The misery and sordidness of these conventional marriages is contrasted with Laura's and Gerty's friendship, which is clearly shown as more fulfilling and less threatening to women's integrity. Matthews points at the excessive attention that critics have devoted to the relationship between Laura and Roger Adams since, according to the author's autobiography, Glasgow's mysterious lover Gerald B— died by the time the novel was published. Indeed, there are obvious parallels between the protagonist and its author but, as Matthews argues, the enormous significance of women's relationships has been consistently displaced in favour of Glasgow's love affair.[69] While most Glasgow scholars have concentrated on Glasgow's despair at the end of her relationship with

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[69] Matthews' study of Glasgow's correspondence at the time *The Wheel of Life* was being written corroborate her argument despite the apparent centrality of her affair with Gerald. See Pamela R. Matthews, 'Between Ellen and Louise: Female Friendship, Glasgow's Letters to Louise Chandler Moulton, and *The Wheel of Life*', in *Ellen Glasgow: New Perspectives*, Dorothy M. Scura, ed. (Knoxville: the University of Tennessee Press, 1995) 106-124.

Gerald, her letters to other women (unlike those she addressed to her male acquaintances) attest to her strong commitment to female friendships. As Matthews notes,

> Glasgow's letters to Moulton (along with others written about this time to Mary Johnston and Lizzie Patterson) suggest that regardless of "Gerald," Glasgow's emotional life was far from impoverished and indicate that much of her fulfillment came from her relationships with women's friends.[70]

"Why do you seem to think that the beginning and middle and end of my existence is a man? There are times when I find even a turkey more interesting." (*TMOC*, 173) Molly Merryweather's angry statement in *The Miller of Old Church* seems to confirm this hypothesis. Matthews thus exposes the critics' myopia in focusing on Glasgow's love story with Gerald: "just as life is supposed to begin, develop, and end with a man, her narrative's convention-bound trajectory with its 'beginning and middle and end' is supposed to revolve around the marriage plot and its romantic hero."[71] Glasgow's novels during this period reveal a gradual displacement from the traditional romance plot and instead emphasise the significance of women's relationships. The pattern that Glasgow started in *The Wheel of Life* would be further explored in *The Miller of Old Church*.

The Wheel of Life also inaugurates Glasgow's collection of perverse invalids, frail and lovely ladies who have internalised the cult of invalidism and have managed to subvert it to their own advantage. Laura's old and spinsterish aunt Angela Wilde is the first in a series of "Angel(a)s" whom Glasgow would portray in subsequent novels. Aunt Angela has wilfully "condemned herself to

[70] Ibid., 117.

[71] Ibid., 119.

the life of a prisoner within four walls" (*TWOL* 23) after having been seduced as a young woman. As Julius Rowan Raper points out, "in forty years she has succeeded in transforming her trauma into a workable hypochondria replete with headaches, allergies, and exacerbatable nerves." By feigning illness and thus confining herself to the life of a secluded invalid, he adds, "she manages to prey upon the compassion of her family and, thereby, to tyrannize them." Raper acknowledges that Glasgow's attack is not so much directed at the invalid lady in particular, but at a destructive ideal that identifies femininity as analogous to extreme delicacy and sickness, an invention "of males who desired to guarantee and protect the sanctity of their own bedrooms while they were busy in their neighbor's." [72]

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After *The Wheel of Life*, Glasgow would provide another interesting instance of female invalidism in *The Ancient Law* (1908), through the creation of Lydia Ordway. The novel features a hero, Daniel Ordway, whose virtue is almost difficult to believe at times. The story begins when he is released from prison after having served a sentence for financial fraud. He has a wife and daughter, but they both disown him and go to live with Daniel's father immediately after he is imprisoned. His aristocratic family in Botetourt County rejects him because of his condition as an ex-convict, so he decides to start a new life in the rural area of the Tappahannock. There he devotes his life to helping his community by getting

[72] Julius Rowan Raper, *Without Shelter: the Early Career of Ellen Glasgow* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971) 224.

involved in politics and promoting better working conditions in the neighbourhood. When his spoilt daughter Alice marries an attractive but unworthy man and forges a signature to pay for a fur coat, he assumes the responsibility for it and his past is revealed. Since his political aspirations in the Tappahannock are ruined, he goes back to the family mansion at Botetourt only to find himself a misfit.

> Upon his return, Daniel's beautiful and ice-cold wife Lydia Ordway makes it plain that their married life is never to recommence, and clearly shrinks at any possibility of physical contact with him. Invalidism provides Lydia with a convenient shelter to withdraw from the shame her husband has brought upon the family, while it effectively prevents her husband's approaches. Lydia is not overtly evil, but only a victim of the conventions she has internalised: her coldness and pseudo-invalidism is shown by Glasgow as a consequence of her upbringing in the genteel tradition. Even her husband, despite his revolutionary principles, cannot help but to view her more as an ideal than as a real person. Significantly, as Daniel begins to regard his wife as a woman rather than as the embodiment of an icon, Lydia also changes her attitude and is also more capable to appreciate his virtues. [73]

Despite his negative assessment of *The Ancient Law*, Blair Rouse points to the portrayal of the main female characters as an important precedent to Glasgow's subsequent heroines. In the novel, Emily Brooke embodies the self-assertive and hard-working young woman who rejects the constraints of her aristocratic origins and actively helps other people in the Tappahannock

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[73] Barbro Ekman also points at this issue in his analysis of Glasgow's tyrannical invalids. See Barbro Ekman, *The End of a Legend: Ellen Glasgow's History of Southern Women* (Stockholm: Uppsala, 1979) 94.

community. She represents a healthy alternative to her relatives, the proud but ineffectual Brookes, who cling to their lost grandeur and refuse to see the reality of their financial ruin. In Rouse's words, Emily is an early version of "such interesting Glasgow characters as Dorinda of *Barren Ground*," while Lydia "anticipates some of Ellen Glasgow's later repulsive if pitiful females."[74] Similarly, biographer Susan Goodman acknowledges the significance of *The Wheel of Life* and *The Ancient Law* despite their inferior quality, since both novels "paved the way for *Virginia* (1913) and *Barren Ground* (1925), the books that changed Glasgow's career because they universalised — to use her word — the personal."[75]

Rouse argues that "one probable result of her [Glasgow's] poor health may be the presence in her fiction of important characters who suffer physical or psychic wounds."[76] In the two novels mentioned, Glasgow surrounds a strong female protagonist with women whose lives have been invalidated by their adherence to a code which defines their sense of self only through the male gaze. According to Barbro Ekman, "Glasgow's recurrent theme of the invalid women dates back to her frightening childhood experience with her mother's melancholia."[77] Anne Gholson's mental breakdown, as well Glasgow's own health crises, undoubtedly contributed to her exploration of invalidism and its consequences in women's lives. Susan Goodman also comments on the impact that Anne Gholson's condition had on young Glasgow, which caused the author to depict her invalid

[74] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 63.
[75] Susan Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography* (Baltimore and London: the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 100.

[76] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 20.
[77] Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, 92-93.

characters with an ambiguous mixture of pity and contempt: "Her illnesses, including the severe headaches . . . aligned her with her mother . . . Overtly Glasgow blamed her father for her mother's unhappiness. Covertly she criticized her mother's behaviour in tyrannical, neurasthenic characters."[78]

Sometimes innocent and self-sacrificing, sometimes ridiculous and almost hilarious, sometimes selfish and evil, Glasgow's invalids are always tragic and ultimately pitiable. They most likely respond to the author's attempt of coming to terms with her own condition as an invalid, which often prevented her from travelling or socialising, and at times threatened her literary career. Rouse argues that "one might see in the creation of these characters the novelist's own therapeutic act. Perhaps she imagined in these women the horrible person she herself might become if she surrendered completely to her frail health or used it as a weapon."[79] I agree with Rouse's statement, although it is my belief that Glasgow's invalids served another purpose apart from that of exorcising her own delicate health: they are in my view symbols of the patriarchal invalidation of all women's integrity of self. These "horrible persons" Rouse describes are extreme examples of the pathetic shadows of a person the cult of True Womanhood had created.

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After the unfavourable evaluation Louis Auchincloss makes of Glasgow's two previous novels in *Pioneers and Caretakers*, he considers *The Miller of Old Church* (1911) as "Ellen Glasgow's coming of age, her advent as a major talent

[78] Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 22.
[79] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 21.

in American fiction . . . in the delineation of Mrs. Gay, Ellen Glasgow was writing as well as she would ever write."[80] In the same way she had exposed the debilitating consequences of conventional heterosexuality through the portraits of both invalid and in-valid women characters in *The Wheel of Life* and *The Ancient Law*, Glasgow created one of her best specimens of the selfish and tyrannical invalid in *The Miller of Old Church* through the character of Angela Gay. The novel takes place between 1898 and 1902; in the rural setting of the Southside, the lives of three families are intertwined, together with their intricate past of secret tragedies. The wealthy and sophisticated Gay family lives in a stately mansion called Jordan's Journey, and old Reuben Merryweather lives in the overseer's cottage with his granddaughter Molly. Although the Gays exhibit all the traits of aristocratic grandeur, they are newcomers to the area: they bought the house to the Jordans, its previous owners. Thus, instead of being looked upon with reverence as old residents and former leaders would have been, they are regarded with scorn by the aspiring independent farmers. The family is probably despised basically because of Mr. Gay's past behaviour:[81] the Gays are darkly linked to the Merryweathers through Molly, the illegitimate child of old Jonathan Gay, who made Reuben's daughter Janet pregnant and then deserted her.

The family who gives the title to the novel is an instance of the poor white labouring class who had a chance for economic improvement after the Civil War, the 'good people.'[82] The Revercombs descend from "poor white trash" on the father's side, but the widowed matriarch Sarah Revercomb is one of those

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[80] Auchincloss, *Pioneers and Caretakers*, 69-70.

[81] Blair Rouse also mentions this point. See Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 73.

[82] *CM*, 157. As Glasgow explains, "in Virginia, this class was known, and is still known, as 'good people', a label that distinguishes it from the aristocratic status of 'good families'."

staunch Calvinists that Glasgow portrays with so much irony and wit. She is obstinate, strictly religious and, as Thiebaux remarks, "suspicious of any kind of happiness."[83] The best part of Sarah's blood, her 'vein of iron', is inherited by one of her sons, the handsome and worthy miller Abel. His brothers Abner and Archie are dull and ineffectual, never hoping or even trying to prosper. Abner Revercomb seems to provide an early image of Dorinda's hard-working but unsuccessful father Joshua Oakley in *Barren Ground*, while the young and spoilt Archie is a sketch for the careless and pleasure-seeking Rufus Oakley.[84]

Although the title of the novel might lead the reader to assume that the plot will revolve around Abel Revercomb and his evolution towards self-improvement and economic prosperity, Glasgow again makes a female character the central figure in the novel. It is Molly Merryweather and her domestic world that gives shape and consistency to the story. Glasgow's ambivalent feelings towards illness and towards her own contradictory nature, as well as her concern for women's plight under the Victorian code of femininity is distilled in the protagonist and the minor women characters that surround her. As Matthews states, during this period Glasgow was trying to construct her personal and intellectual self as she struggled between two conflicting definitions, "one toward a tradition of womanhood signified by isolation and passive femininity, the other toward a tradition of cooperative strength."[85] While trying to establish her position in the world of American letters, Glasgow had to confront her own

[83] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 94.
[84] Rouse also points at this possibility in *Ellen Glasgow*, 71-72.

[85] Pamela Matthews, *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Traditions* (Charlottesville and London: the University Press of Virginia, 1994) 55.

emotional and health crises and witness her sister Cary's decline and death.[86] The author was still ambiguous about her commitment to women's traditions, since her professional aspirations collided with the selfless and tragic lives of many women in her life. Her sympathy for the victimised genteel lady is more patent in her next novel, *Virginia* (1913), but as Matthews observes, *The Miller of Old Church* is crucial in her move away from the desire for male approval and towards female affiliation:

> She realized . . . that the female traditions she tried to deny — passivity, selflessness, dependence on men — are really male traditions of womanhood . . . caring for and identifying with others becomes, from an altered viewpoint, evidence of obsessive selflessness and weakness.[87]

The novel starts with the arrival of handsome and dandyish Jonathan Gay, who comes to visit his mother Angela and his unmarried aunt Kesiah. Mrs. Gay's name (as is the case of Angela Wilde in *The Wheel of Life*) is both defining and sarcastic. Although her appearance and manners are those of a delicate and angelic beauty, Jonathan's mother is an example of the cruel invalid who tyrannically rules the family with an iron hand — hidden under a silk glove: "she dominated not by force, but by sentiment . . . she had surrendered all rights in order to grasp more effectively at all privileges." (*TMOC*, 72) Her seemingly weak heart and her lovely helplessness allow her to impose her will within and beyond the household; Angela's fragility prevents those around her from taking a

[86] *The Miller of Old Church* was the last book Cary revised for her sister before her death in August 1911, the same year in which the book was published. Cary had been Glasgow's main support through her literary career, as the author's dedication to the novel evidences: "To my sister Cary Glasgow McCormack, in loving acknowledgment of help and sympathy through many years." According to Goodman, Cary "made it possible for her sister to envision a different future", since her "beautiful and literary" elder sister "epitomized everything that Glasgow wanted to be." See Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, 34.

[87] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 60.

single step without her approval, since any opposition might be fatal. As Ekman states, in order to protect her from distress, "she is shielded from all unpleasant facts of life and allowed to live in her world of evasive idealism:"[88]

> One of Mrs. Gay's first principles of diplomacy was that an unpleasant fact treated as non-existent, was deprived in a measure of its power for evil. By the application of this principle, she had extinguished her brother-in-law's passion for Janet Merryweather. (*TMOC*, 325)

As Kesiah tells Jonathan, it was due to Angela's influence that old Mr. Gay decided not to marry Janet Merryweather when she became pregnant, which drove her to despair and madness. Janet died shortly after giving birth to her daughter, as Kesiah explains:

> I believe your uncle Jonathan would have married the girl's mother— Janet Merryweather — but for your mother's influence . . . He broke it to her once— his intention, I mean — and for several days afterwards we quite despaired of her life. It was then that she made him promise — he was quite distracted with remorse for he adored Angela — that he would never allude to it again while she was alive. We thought then that it would be only for a short while, but she has outlived him ten years in spite of her heart disease. (*TMOC*, 83-84)

Unlike her sister, Kesiah is neither physically impaired nor does she pretend to be so. She has actually effaced herself continually to take care of Angela and, to my mind, she is the one who really deserves to be pitied. While Angela has taken advantage of her looks and her delicacy to subvert the Victorian cult of invalidism and use it for her own benefit, Kesiah has been truly invalidated by family duties and patriarchal conventions:

> She [Molly] honestly liked Kesiah, though, in common with the rest of her little world, she had fallen into the habit of regarding her as a person whom it was hardly worth one's while to consider. Mrs. Gay

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[88] Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, 94.

> had so completely effaced her sister that the rough edges of Kesiah's character were hardly visible beneath the little lady's enveloping charm. (*TMOC*, 231)

Despite her many virtues and Angela's wickedness, Kesiah's qualities are eclipsed by her sister's delicate beauty. In fact, Kesiah tried to act on behalf of Janet, knowing that Angela could convince Mr. Gay to act in a decent way and marry her. This apparently distressed Angela to such an extent that she locked herself in her room for days and refused to speak to her sister: she suffered (or pretended to suffer) one of her heart attacks and made everyone fear for her life.[89] Old Mr. Jonathan, like all men, worshipped Angela, and he blamed Kesiah for Angela's crisis. Being plain, Kesiah was automatically doomed to spinsterhood, as Thiebaux notes, "in a society that bred women for love."[90] Her gift for painting and her hopes to go abroad and study art in Europe were sacrificed to duty and tradition, again mainly because of Angela's influence:

> When she was young she had a perfect mania for drawing, and it used to distress mother so much. A famous portrait painter . . . saw one of her sketches by accident and insisted that we ought to send her to Paris to study. Kesiah was wild to go at the time, but of course it was out of the question that a Virginia lady should go off by herself and paint perfectly nude people in a foreign city . . . Why on earth should a girl want to go streaking across the water to study art . . . when she had a home she could stay in and men folk who could look after her? . . . she made herself ridiculous when she talked of ambition. (*TMOC*, 75-76)

Kesiah's ambitions are ruined after a life of enforced domesticity and selfless drudgery for her invalid sister. By the time she has the financial independence to pursue her career as a painter, her artistic aspirations have been completely invalidated and her personality smothered by the suffocating weight

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[89] *TMOC*, 192. As Kesiah recalls that "we lived in a continual panic about her for several years, and it was her weakness, as much as her beauty, that gave her her tremendous power over him. He was like wax in her hands, though of course he never suspected it."
[90] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 97.

of tradition and propriety. In fact, Kesiah provides a remarkable metaphor for women's invisibility under patriarchy. She is described in the novel as a shadow, almost non-existent. Because of her plainness and her spinsterhood, she seems to be ignored by everyone around her, almost as if she was transparent:

> She was one of those unfortunate women of a past generation, who, in offering no allurement to the masculine eye, appeared to defeat the single end for which woman was formed. As her very right to existence lay in her possible power to attract, the denial of that power by nature, or the frustration of it by circumstances, had deprived her, almost from the cradle, of her only authoritative reason for being . . . It was the habit of those around her to forget her existence, except when she was needed to render service. (*TMOC*, 70, 79-80)

An instance of Kesiah's invisibility due to the unrealistic belief that women's appearance must conform to men's ideal of it is provided by Mr. Chamberlayne, the comically chivalric family lawyer. He regards Angela as an epitome of womanly virtue because she is fragile and beautiful, but ignores Kesiah as if she was an abomination of nature. As Barbro Ekman points out, Mr. Chamberlayne is one of those "ugly and repulsive men" Glasgow delights in ridiculing, who ironically "think of themselves as irresistible to women:"[91]

> In his long and intimate acquaintance, he had never looked at Kesiah in the face, and he never intended to. He was perfectly aware that if he were for an instant to forget himself so far as to contemplate her features, he should immediately lose all patience with her. No woman, he felt, had the right to affront so openly a man's ideal of what the sex should be. (*TMOC*, 98)

Both women are thus examples of the debilitating effects of patriarchy, which forces artificial selves upon women under the pretence of their protection within the shelter of 'domestic bliss.' As Glasgow herself states in her book of

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[91] Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, 75.

prefaces, "Mrs. Gay, who bore sorrow so nobly, and Kesiah, who bore ugliness so submissively, were both genuine products of the code of beautiful behaviour."[92]

Invalidism, illness and madness thus appear in the novel both as a physical or mental condition and also as a powerful metaphor for women's position in patriarchy. Along with Angela and Kesiah, as this chapter will presently illustrate, the independent and self-assertive Molly is surrounded by other invalid as well as invalidated women. These minor characters serve as opposites that emphasise her strong personality and act as uncanny mirrors of the self she could become if she adhered to the Victorian code of femininity. Being socialised into self-effacement and conditioned to believe that the only fulfilment possible lies in marriage and motherhood, these women have become faint and diffuse versions of a human being. Even the ghostly shadow of victimised Janet Merryweather is present in the novel, and certainly determines Molly's attitude towards men and marriage.

Like Glasgow herself, Molly is a strong and brave character who does not allow her life to be shaped my male standards but, again like Glasgow, her genetic inheritance and her upbringing result in a clash of opposites. Glasgow identified with her mother and resented her father's strict Calvinist morals, which he could easily overlook when they concerned philandering with the black servants. However, the Scottish 'vein of iron' she inherited from him precisely served her to rebel against him and the constraints he attempted to impose upon her. Similarly, Molly has both the proud, flirtatious and volatile Gay blood and the meek and humble nature of the Merryweather family, a combination that entails contradictions but which also involves a potential for change:

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[92] *CM*, 128. Thiebaux probably echoes Glasgow statement when she observes that "both women, delicate Angela and homely, submissive Kesiah, are genuine products of the code of beautiful behaviour that deformed them as women and warped their human development." See Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 97.

> Her impulsiveness, her pride, her lack of self-control, all these marked her kinship not to Reuben Merryweather, but to Jonathan Gay. The qualities against which she rebelled cried aloud in her rebellion. The inheritance she abhorred endowed her with the capacity for that abhorrence. (*TMOC*, 67)

Molly is conscious of her mother's story: despite the fact that she likes flirting with men, she remains chaste and actually finds physical contact with men disgusting: "when I see that look in a man's face and feel the touch of his hands upon me I want to strike out and kill." (*TMOC*, 69) Echoing Glasgow's own experience and her views on heterosexual relationships, Molly always remembers her mother's tragic ending. Both Janet Merryweather and Anne Gholson Glasgow died for love: both suffered an emotional and mental breakdown because of a man's betrayal. While rejecting the constraints of traditional femininity and heterosexuality, Molly is aware of the importance of listening to *her*story. Furthermore, her affectionate relationships with Blossom Revercomb, Judy Hatch, and later on with her aunt Kesiah also emphasise her inclination towards a fulfilling relationship that does not entail loss of self. Similarly, after retreating from the female world that had shaped her childhood in search of professional success, Glasgow returned to the traditions of her foremothers, and saw female bonding as a potentially empowering alternative for women. *The Miller of Old Church* is thus crucial in Glasgow's direction towards this option, as Matthews claims:

> She recognizes what has been a stumbling block in her own thinking about her identity as a woman and her place in a woman's tradition: the simple fact that the storytellers have been men . . . Depicting female friendship in her fiction becomes a way to self-definition and, simultaneously, to redefinition of both literary and cultural history.[93]

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[93] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 59.

When Molly becomes twenty-one, old Mr. Gay's will makes her an heiress and the truth about her origins is revealed. Molly receives her father's inheritance on condition that she lives with the Gay family, so she moves to Jordan's Journey and travels abroad with her aunts for a while. During this period she tries to educate herself and learn ladylike manners, but she also realises about the hypocrisy and selfishness of the upper class she now belongs to. She especially learns to appreciate Kesiah's goodness and starts to regard her with affection, while she begins to unmask the evil behind Angela's loveliness. She gradually gets to know more about her mother's story and Angela's active (or, should one say, passive?) participation in Janet's tragic ending:

> He had promised her, when he thought he was dying, some dreadful thing. And after that he was afraid – afraid of her all his life. Isn't it terrible that such a saintly person should have caused so much sin? . . . When Mrs. Gay first came to live with him, she was so beautiful and so delicate . . . so soft that she could smother a person like a mass of feathers. (*TMOC*, 174)

Molly learns how, some twenty years earlier, her mother had also innocently believed that Angela's delicate beauty was the outward expression of a pious nature: in her despair, Janet had "flung herself on the mercy of that gentle heart and had found it iron." (*TMOC*, 426) Even though Angela is indirectly responsible for Janet's insanity and her brother-in-law's death, she is admired and pitied by everyone except for her sister and Molly who, as Ekman remarks, are able to "see through her."[94] Old Mr. Gay could never realise about her wickedness, and much less become conscious of her sinister influence over him:

> She smothered his [old Mr. Gay's] soul with her softness, and wound him about her little finger when she appeared all the time too weak to lift her hand. That's just what men think women ought to be

[94] Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, 94.

> — just the kind that Mr. Mullen preaches about in his sermons — the kind that rules without your knowing it. (*TMOC*, 175)

Molly feels the softly oppressive influence of Angela, who stands for the cult of True Womanhood and the adjoining loss of self it entails. By trying to make a lady of her, Mrs. Gay attempts to suffocate Molly's self-assertiveness in the same way she smothered Kesiah's personality and self-esteem. For instance, she shows her disapproval of Molly's walks in the fields, since she regards them as improper and unnecessary for a lady. Here Glasgow again points to the evidence that patriarchal strictures debilitated not only women's minds but their bodies as well, until they became sad caricatures of a human being, that is, both in-valid and invalid:

> Since the hour in which she had left the overseer's cottage and moved into the 'big house' at Jordan's Journey, the appealing little lady had been the dominant influence in her life — an influence so soft and yet so overpowering that she had at times a sensation of being smothered in scented swansdown. (*TMOC*, 317)

> One doesn't have amusement when one is an invalid; one has only medicines . . . (poor dear mother used to say that the difference between the liver of a lady and that of another person, was that one required no exercise and the other did) — but Kesiah, who is the best creature in the world, is very eccentric in some ways, and she imagines that her health suffers when she is kept in the house for several years. Once she got into a temper and walked a mile or two on the road, but when she returned I was in such a state of nervousness that she promised me never to leave the lawn again unless a gentleman was with her. (*TMOC*, 74)

In the same way that Kesiah and Mr. Gay allowed Angela to control their lives, young Jonathan Gay's blind adoration for his mother's sickly loveliness causes him to fall into the same trap. Jonathan is a dandy and a careless flirt who predictably repeats his dead uncle's weakness of seducing a woman and then abandoning her, presumably, out of consideration for Angela's delicate health. He immediately feels attracted by Molly's beauty, a replica of her mother's, but

the protective influence of Janet's story seems to be there to warn her. In the same way that country folk say that the troubled spirit of Jonathan Gay roams "Ha'nts Walk", the ghost of wronged Janet Merryweather also seems to make her presence felt at times:

> Gradually he [Jonathan] began to listen for the sound and to miss it when there came a long silence. One might easily imagine it to be the tapping of ghostly fingers – of the fingers of pretty Janet Merryweather – some quarter of a century earlier. (*TMOC*, 43)

When Jonathan and Molly first meet, he is startled by her untamed spirit and her disdain for men, which he regards as unpleasant. Jonathan is one of the classical male specimens Glasgow portrays in almost every one of her novels and her short fiction: her poignant irony in describing Jonathan's artificial notions of femininity is proportional to her condemnation of them. As is the case with Mr. Chamberlayne, Glasgow overtly mocks Jonathan's belief that a 'womanly woman' must be per force dependent, an unrealistic view which has doubtlessly been influenced by his mother's example:

> His ideal woman — the woman of the early Victorian period — was submissive and clinging . . . Meekness had always seemed to him the becoming mental and facial expression for the sex; and that a woman should resent appeared almost as indelicate as that she should propose. (*TMOC*, 38)

Rouse argues that Jonathan "is an object of pity": rather than a villain, he posits, "he is really a rather weak, affable young man who is the slave of his own inclinations and the victim of his mother's emotional entanglements."[95] Although I agree with Rouse's statement that Jonathan is not a consciously wicked character, he represents the typical Southern cavalier who carelessly exploits

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[95] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 74.

women, since it is assumed that gentlemen of his social position are non-monogamous by nature. As most of Glasgow's male prototypes, he inevitably destroys the women who fail to see his moral weakness and conform to his fixed notion of them. He is a traditional Victorian gentleman who worships the (outwardly) submissive lady his mother so well represents, which grants her the power to manipulate him. However, his double sexual standard allows him to behave in a less gentlemanly manner with other women, since the separation of spheres guarantees the invisibility of his actions:

> In earlier days he had had several affairs of sentiment with ladies to whom he declined to bow if he happened to be walking with a member of his family; and this fine discrimination was characteristic of him, for it proved that he was capable of losing his heart in a direction where he would refuse to lift his hat. (*TMOC*, 96)

Being turned down by Molly, Jonathan seeks entertainment in another fresh flower. His chosen victim is Molly's friend Blossom, Abner Revercomb's daughter. A lovely and well-built blonde, Blossom feels stifled by her monotonous life and the strict discipline of her grandmother. Because her religious beliefs prevent her from having sexual intercourse outside marriage, Jonathan marries her in secret with the promise that he will inform his family of their union in due time. Jonathan is of course afraid of distressing his lovely and fragile mother by acknowledging such an inappropriate match. As Raper contends, Jonathan exhibits his uncle's weakness, and his chivalric consideration for his mother predicts another tragic ending:

> Jonathan Gay, the disorganized, overripe nephew of Molly's father, seems little more than the present avatar of his philandering uncle and of their class's irresponsible impulsiveness. Blood and environment cannot be distinguished in young Jonathan's case

> since they exert parallel influences; his mother's shielded invalidism, for example, provides the same convenient alibi for his irresponsibility. [96]

As Raper notes, Angela is not entirely to blame for Jonathan's behaviour: his apparent concern for his mother actually provides a very suitable excuse to elude the consequences of his actions. As the novel later discloses, Jonathan does not have any intention of ever revealing the truth about his marriage. By the time Molly moves to Jordan's Journey, Jonathan does not pay any more secret visits to Blossom and he soon gets tired of her. He starts openly pursuing Molly, since she is now an equal and thus an eligible wife. Blossom's lovesickness gradually turns into insanity and she starts walking distractedly across the fields, hopelessly seeking Jonathan. She finally despairs when she discovers him courting Molly while she is hiding behind some bushes. Thus Blossom becomes another victim of the romantic illusions about love she has been conditioned to believe. After having given everything for the sake of a man, she is transformed into a pathetic shadow by his betrayal. Like Janet Merryweather, she becomes another ghost roaming Ha'nts Walk.

Glasgow exposes Jonathan's double moral standard once more in his account of his marriage to Blossom. He tries to justify the end of his affection for her on the grounds that men's instincts cannot be helped: "One can't explain it to a woman. They're not made of flesh and blood as men are." Glasgow sarcastically voices her anger through Molly's answer, who reminds him that the apparent lack of sexual desire is unnatural and male-imposed: "They've had to

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[96] Raper, *Without Shelter*, 238.

drill their flesh and blood." (*TMOC*, 412) As Mrs. Gaskell claims in her story "The Grey Woman", "the sins of the fathers are visited upon their children."[97] In the same way old Mr. Gay was mysteriously killed in the forest (presumably by Abner Revercomb, who had been in love with Janet in his youth), Jonathan is shot, again by Abner, in the same place. Not knowing about his marriage to Blossom, Abner believes that Jonathan has seduced Blossom and kills him. As Ekman notices, "ironically enough Angela manages to bear this very real tragedy without a heart attack because it does not shatter her make-believe world."[98] While everybody admires her endurance of grief for Jonathan's loss, only Molly and Kesiah realise that she never loved her son except as another instrument of her power.

Glasgow offers a more optimistic view of marriage through the love story of Molly and Abel Rebercomb. Abel is madly in love with Molly, and they even become engaged at one point in the novel. However, she never seems to be convinced of the implications of marriage and fears that its constraints will suffocate her. Indeed, most marriages in the novel lead women to illness, insanity or death, thus corroborating Glasgow's (and Molly's) view that traditional heterosexual unions damage women's integrity of self in various ways. Reverend Orlando Mullen's sermons are illustrative of the significant role that religious predicaments played in the maintenance of patriarchal values, as one of his classical statements evidences: "To know no more is woman's happiest

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[97] Elizabeth Gaskell, "The Grey Woman", in *Curious, If True. Strange Tales by Elizabeth Gaskell*, Jenny Uglow, ed. (London: Virago, 1995) 190.

[98] Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, 95.

knowledge." (*TMOC*, 128) Mullen's discourse, as Thiebaux points out,[99] equates marriage with sacrifice — that is, woman's self-sacrifice for her husband:

> No womanly woman cared to make a career. What the womanly woman desired was to remain an Incentive, an Ideal, an Inspiration. If the womanly woman possessed a talent, she did not use it — for this would unsex her — she sacrificed it in herself . . . Self-sacrifice — to use a worn metaphor — self-sacrifice was the breath of the nostrils of the womanly woman. It was for her power of self-sacrifice that men loved her and made an Ideal of her . . . The home was founded on sacrifice, and woman was the pillar and the ornament of the home. (*TMOC*, 130)

After Molly receives her father's inheritance, she becomes aware of the possibilities of self-improvement that her new social status can offer, and confesses her doubts about marriage to Abel. When she asks him for some time to clarify her ideas, Abel convinces himself that Molly does not love him and instead he marries her friend Judy Hatch: he takes pity on Judy because of her plainness and her consequent lack of suitors. He also believes that a dutiful, hard-working wife like her will suit him, under the "delusion that there was a mysterious affinity between ugliness and virtue." (*TMOC*, 258) Raper asserts that "in this relationship, Ellen Glasgow amplified a theme she had touched on in *The Wheel of Life*: that certain forms of compassion untempered by critical intelligence are pernicious."[100] Raper points here at Abel's error in marrying Judy out of compassion and a sense of duty. To my mind, however, Glasgow's condemnation of this "pernicious" sense of duty focuses more on Judy's victimisation than on Abel's unhappiness.

Judy is devotedly religious and secretly pines for the young and handsome Reverend Orlando Mullen. As in Kesiah's case, her lack of physical

[99] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 98.

[100] Raper, *Without Shelter*, 239.

attractiveness has automatically destined her to a life of parasitic spinsterhood. Her plainness makes her believe that marriage to any man is an honour and definitely preferable to no marriage at all, so when Abel proposes to her she accepts without hesitation. Once again, Glasgow ironically voices the contradiction in male ideals through Molly's wise remarks: "If you part your hair and look a certain way nothing you can do will keep them from thinking you an angel. When I smile at Mr. Mullen in church it convinces him that I like visiting the sick." (*TMOC*, 176) Although Reverend Mullen insists that virtue and good deeds are more important than beauty, he falls in love with Molly when Judy is a more fervent Christian than she is. Mullen also shows his hypocrisy by endlessly praising Angela Gay as an epitome of womanliness — "It is not possible, I believe, for any woman to approach more closely the perfect example of her sex." (*TMOC*, 193) — when she precisely embodies the abominations that the cult of femininity creates.

Abel and Judy's marriage is obviously never happy: although they have physical intimacy, they never share any sort of companionship. Judy, formerly an exemplary self-effacing homemaker, becomes more and more distracted and gradually loses contact with the world because of her unspoken love for Reverend Mullen. She loses her appetite and her physical strength, to the point that she is disdainfully described by Jonathan as "that thin, drawn out, anaemic girl." (*TMOC*, 373)[101] She finally dies from premature labour caused by a neurotic belief that Mullen has had a fatal accident with his horse, after giving

[101] Through the description of Judy's wasting body, Glasgow again parallels the exhibition of physical decline (possibly anorexia) as a symbol of women's emotional and psychological starvation. In her novel *Cassandra* (1852), Florence Nightingale had established this equation, which she viewed as the result of patriarchal constraints on women. See the analysis of Nightingale's work in Anna Krugovoy Silver's *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 17-18.

birth to a stillborn child. The symbolism of dead children, which Glasgow uses in other works of fiction, is in my view a grim confirmation of the barrenness and destruction conventional relationships bring about. By subverting the traditional role of motherhood, which ideally confers on women the highest measure of happiness, Glasgow highlights the potentially fatal effects of silencing and incapacitating women. Thus Judy becomes another victim of a system that deprives women from expressing their desires and feelings, even when they are socialised into living only through their emotions. The same code that breeds women to crave only for love dismisses them as useless and not-valid if their appearance does not inspire men's desire. As Matthews observes,

> in trying to define a female self against a male tradition of possessiveness, assumed superiority, and attempts to dominate, Glasgow implies that women are too easily convinced of their inferiority and their need for male support, and too quick too assent to the diminished view of themselves reflected back from a male gaze.[102]

Through the characters of Kesiah Blount, Blossom Revercomb and Judy Hatch Revercomb (together with the invisible but ever-present spirit of Janet Merryweather), Glasgow furnishes the protagonist with images in which to mirror herself and recognise the dangers of accepting this distorted version of female identity as true. These minor characters have conformed to the debilitated image of themselves that Matthews describes and have thus become shadows of the women they really are, or could have been. Likewise, the author asserted her strong identification with her female acquaintances in a "self-mirroring"[103] that was not destructive or incapacitating. She also recognised the sickening effects of

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[102] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 57.
[103] Ibid., 59. As Matthews affirms, "that self-mirroring becomes a tool for discovering a female self unmediated by (male) cultural definitions, untransformed, insofar as that is ever possible for anyone, by patriarchally imposed expectations."

internalising the male-defined ideal of self-effacing femininity that had destroyed her mother, as Matthews asserts:

> other women reflect a 'second self' . . . a female image in which a woman can view a reflected female self instead of a reflected image of otherness. Men, in this formulation, instead project a desired self, a male-defined female self that is foreign, other. Glasgow increasingly will come to believe that for a woman to see herself in a man's eyes is to experience a death of self. [104]

As Thiebaux remarks, it is surprising that the novel finishes with the conventional happy union of the lovers, since "Abel demands that Molly gives herself completely." [105] Despite Abel's noble heart and sincere love for Molly, Glasgow cannot help but show the dominant male in him. The endless quarrels between Abel and Molly mostly had their origin in Molly's "inappropriate" behaviour, which betrays Abel's traditional views on women in spite of his open-mindedness and his beliefs in progress: "she possessed a thousand virtues, he was aware; she was generous, honourable according to her lights, loyal, brave, charitable and unselfish. But it is the woman of a single virtue, not a thousand, that a man exalts." (*TMOC*, 254)

The love relationship between Abel and Molly is often the centre of conversations at Bottom's Ordinary, the local pub. The tavern philosophers who meet and comment on the latest gossip in the neighbourhood serve as a sort of Greek chorus to the novel where, as Thiebaux notes, Glasgow admirably reproduces the speech of country folk with often comic results.[106] In one of the many tavern scenes in the novel, Molly's immodest behaviour is criticised by Old

[104] Ibid., 44.
[105] Thiebaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, 99.

[106] Ibid., 98.

Adam Doolittle and Solomon Hatch, who view Molly's education as a potential for evil. The morals of the lower class, Glasgow seems to comment, emulate those of the upper classes at least as they concern women, since Molly's (and, by extension, all women's) intellectual improvement is regarded as a threat to 'true' feminine values:

> Why, when I was young that warn't nothin' in the way of meanness that a good woman wouldn't put up with. They'd shut thar eyes to Hagars, white or black, rather than lose the respect of men by seemin' to be aware of any immodesty . . . I for one was al'ays set against teachin' women to read for fear they'd come to know things. Thar's a deal of evil that gits into print, an' if you ain't acquainted with yo' letters thar's less temptation to nose arter it . . . Who knows if she'd [Janet] ever have gone wrong if she hadn't learned to read printed words? (*TMOC*, 298-299)

Both Mr. Doolittle and Mr. Hatch seem to forget (very conveniently) that Janet did not miraculously get pregnant, and omit the fact that Jonathan Gay acted immorally by deserting her. The unrefined but life-wise voice of Betsy Bottom, which presides all the conversations at Bottom's Ordinary, speaks in defence of Molly and her mother. Despite her lack of education, she is able to unmask the double morality that sets different standards of virtue for men and women:

> Thar're some that thinks morals ain't meant for any but women . . . but I ain't one of 'em, as William Ming can testify, that holds to that view. Viciousness is viciousness whether it be male or female, and Mr. Mullen himself in the pulpit couldn't convince me that it don't take two to make an impropriety. (*TMOC*, 300)

At one point in the novel Abel confesses to Molly that he almost resents her being so pretty, since he has to bear with men's comments about her behaviour — together with their looks of admiration. Molly can see the contradiction in his words:

> ‘Why on earth should I make myself ugly just to please you?’
> ‘It wouldn’t be making yourself ugly — I can’t endure an ugly woman. All I want you to be is sober.’
> ‘The what made you fall in love with me? It certainly was not for soberness.’ (*TMOC*, 210)

His triumphant speech in the final love scene seems to voice once again the patriarchal discourse of marriage, according to which a woman must give up everything for her husband, while he never renounces any of his privileges:

> My beauty, your submission is adorable if it would only last! . . . If it isn’t everything you’re offering me — if you are keeping back a particle of yourself — body or soul — it is too late. I won’t take anything from you unless I take everything — unless your whole happiness as well as mine is in *your* giving. (*TMOC*, 431-432; emphasis added)

After more than four hundred pages of Molly’s sceptical refusal of marriage, it is almost bizarre to see her begging for Abel’s forgiveness, and the reader cannot help wondering why Glasgow chose to end the novel that way. Abel’s words, although full of adoration, imply a concept of married life that cages Molly in domesticity. Even when he knows that Molly is an independent spirit who needs freedom and autonomy, he promises to “worship” her and keep her “wrapped in silk.” (*TMOC*, 431) Despite the romantic ending of the novel, Glasgow seems to hope (along with the reader) that Molly will continue to remember her mother’s story, and that the tragic examples of the other women around her will prevent her entrapment in patriarchal strictures. As Matthews remarks, Molly’s assertiveness and her constant awareness of *her*stories hint at Glasgow’s own effort of recovering the lost narratives of previous generations of women, silenced and invalidated by masculine notions of femininity: “as her protagonist, Molly Merryweather, rewrites her mother’s story and changes its ending,

Glasgow rewrites *her* mother's story and in so doing suggests it is possible for all women to find and redefine a usable woman's past."[107]

5.2. Woman as Ideal: *Virginia* (1913).

Summary of the Novel Discussed in this Section:

- ***Virginia* (1913)**

The novel's protagonist Virginia Pendleton embodies the mythical Southern beauty, whose life is devoted to love and self-sacrifice as the Southern ideal of womanhood demands. Her mother Lucy Pendleton and the frustrated invalid Belinda Treadwell, among other characters, constitute a warning of Virginia's future, but she instead views them as positive role models. In contrast, her less lovely but more intelligent friend Susan manages to combine a happy marriage with a successful life in the public sphere. As years pass and Virginia's beauty fades, her intellectual husband Oliver Treadwell gets tired of the ideal she represents and finally divorces her. At the end of the novel, and with her three children gone, Virginia must face the prospect of a meaningless future, since her life has been exclusively devoted to her husband and children.

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By the time of Virginia*, Glasgow had made an important shift in her thinking: rather than blame women for their passivity, perhaps she should hold men responsible for their imposition of it.*[108]

This chapter explores the disastrous consequences of the code of genteel behaviour in one of Glasgow's most celebrated novels, *Virginia*. Its female protagonist, Virginia Pendleton, named reverentially after the state she so well represents, epitomises the

[107] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 56. [emphasis in original]

[108] Pamela Matthews, *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Traditions* (Charlottesville and London: the University Press of Virginia, 1994) 71.

tragedy of the ideal Southern lady who seems to be destined for a life of love and happiness, but whose self-imposed duty towards husband and children turns out to be a useless sacrifice. *Virginia* was published in 1913, when Glasgow's novels had already become best sellers. Her previous works had pictured female protagonists who overtly challenge traditional views of womanhood and attempt to survive and succeed without male help. Rachel Gavin in *The Descendant* (1897), Mariana Musin in *Phases of an Inferior Planet* (1898), and Laura Wilde in *The Wheel of Life* (1906) are suspended between their artistic careers (painter, singer and poet) and romantic love, while female affiliation is hinted as an alternative to the self-annihilation domesticity entails. As Pamela Matthews points out,

> from 1895 to 1911, Glasgow explores the traditions offered to her and searches for the way to write her own outline for a successful woman's story, to revise her mother's story in such a way that it allows for the salvation of self in a tradition of selfless giving. Beginning about 1911 with the realization that history and herstory differ, her story changes dramatically.[109]

Virginia signifies a complete shift in the author's views of the conventional Southern lady, as its protagonist is precisely the perfect product of those traditions. As the author explains in *A Certain Measure*, she created Virginia in order to denounce the women who accepted Victorian standards of womanhood but, as she says, "I discovered . . . that my irony grew fainter as it yielded at last to sympathetic compassion." (*CM*, 79) As Pamela Matthews among other critics states,[110] Glasgow first attempted to use irony against the genteel traditions she had come to reject, until she realised that those traditions were imposed by men. Besides her own traditional upbringing and her recurrent periods of illness and invalidism, in the character of Virginia Pendleton the

[109] Ibid., 24.
[110] Ibid., 69.

author could recognise various women she had known and loved,[111] among them her mother and the sister to whom she dedicated the book: "To the Radiant Spirit Who Was My Sister Cary Glasgow McCormack".

Virginia appeared after a tragic period in Glasgow's life. In 1893 she lost her mother Ann Jane Gholson. The author admitted that its protagonist Virginia was partly created from memories and recollections of stories she had been told about how her mother looked when she was young.[112] Mrs. Glasgow's health had been delicate, partly due to having given birth to ten children, but it seems her state had degenerated into an incapacitating mental illness after she learned that her husband had been indulging in sexual affairs with black women. Glasgow's brother-in-law Walter McCormack committed suicide in 1894,[113] only four years after his marriage to her sister Cary. Some years later, in 1909, her favourite brother Frank also committed suicide. Both men were, as Glasgow defines them, sensitive, compassionate, and uncomfortable with conventional patriarchal values. Cary was brilliant and had aspirations of becoming an author herself, but she quickly abandoned that prospect in deference to the seemingly superior intelligence of her husband. She died in 1911, probably of uterine cancer, and those deaths are, according to Matthews, crucial to the author's "grim confirmation that traditional masculinity kills."[114] Virginia Pendleton is the embodiment of those women

[111] See *CM*, 78-83: "I knew her life as well as if I had lived it in her place, hour by hour, day by day, week by week; and, gradually, I found that her image was blending in contour with the figures of several women I had known well in the past . . . she was as close to me, and as real, as my heart or my nerves. . . . She was, indeed, as I had known her in one I loved and pitied, the logical result of an inordinate sense of duty, the crowning achievement of the code of beautiful behaviour and of the Episcopal Church."

[112] *CM*, 90. See also *LL*, 131. Glasgow's letter to Allen Tate is dated August 24, 1930. "Of the first four, *Virginia* is my favourite, . . . Perhaps I like *Virginia* because it was the evocation of an ideal and is always associated with my mother and the women of her period. I describe Virginia in the beginning exactly as I was told my mother looked when she was a girl."

[113] McCormack apparently committed suicide in a New York hotel during a business trip, under quite sordid circumstances. See, for example, Susan Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998) 44-47 and Julius Rowan Raper, *From the Sunken Garden: The Fiction of Ellen Glasgow, 1916-1945* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) 4.

[114] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 71.

Glasgow had first blamed for their passivity, but whom, as she realised, had been victimised by the Southern code of womanly behaviour:

> Like all the women of her race, she had played gallantly and staked her world upon a single chance. Whereas a man might have missed love and still have retained life, with a woman love and life were interchangeable terms . . . Though love was the only window through which a woman might look on a larger world, she was fatuously supposed neither to think of it nor to desire it until it had offered itself unsolicited. Every girl born into the world was destined for a heritage of love or of barrenness – yet she was forbidden to exert herself either to invite the one or to avoid the other. For, in spite of the fiery splendour of Southern womanhood during the war years, to be feminine, in the eyes of the period, was to be morally passive. (*V*,111-112)

As Philip D. Atteberry states, *Virginia* "daringly focuses on a character whose mind has been incapacitated by cultural conditioning."[115] Through Virginia Pendleton Glasgow reveals the complex process of socialisation that produces these exquisite specimens of feminine delicacy, as well as the hypocrisy underlying this process and the helplessness it causes in its victims. In *Virginia*, Glasgow does not tell the story of a physically invalid woman, but of a woman who has been invalidated by the code of genteel behaviour. As has been said in previous paragraphs, Glasgow was ambivalent towards the tradition of the Southern lady, and this was partly perhaps because she felt it was an important part of herself. Glasgow saw herself as an unconventional woman who, despite difficulties, succeeded in earning her living through her writing. She managed to occupy a respected place in the literary arena, which gave her the financial independence she needed. However, her periods of illness acted as a reminder of her social condition as feminine and thus as in-valid for the space in the public sphere she had struggled so much to inhabit. Besides, the experiences of her mother and sister provided her with warning examples against adhering to the principles in which they

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[115] Philip D. Atteberry, 'The Framing of Glasgow's *Virginia'*, in *Ellen Glasgow: New Perspectives*, Dorothy M. Scura, ed. (Knoxville: the University of Tennessee Press, 1995) 124.

had all been indoctrinated, and prompted her to look for a more fulfilling alternative instead. Glasgow perhaps saw herself as the combination of both types of women, and feared that the independent and self-confident woman she had become could be menaced by illness or by the social forces surrounding her. This could account for the presence of invalid and in-valid women in the novel, as well as for the creation of minor characters that act as opposites or mirror images of the protagonist.

Virginia's schoolteacher Miss Priscilla Batte, her friend Susan Treadwell, her mother Lucy Pendleton and Susan's mother Belinda function as Virginia's alter egos in the novel. Lucy Pendleton has led a life of poverty and sacrifice under the pretence of happiness and respectability. As Glasgow ironically says, Mrs. Pendleton holds the conviction that happiness consists in slaving for her husband and daughter and "working herself to death for [their] sake." (*V*, 32) Her personality and her aspirations have been crushed by her adherence to the ideal of ladylike behaviour, and her conviction of the rightness of this ideal prevents her from being realistic about her life or warning her daughter about its perils. Although she is not confined to her bed like Belinda, Lucy Pendleton is like a shadow, ineffectual and almost non-existent except as a projection of her husband and daughter.

Belinda Treadwell is a hopeless invalid who suffers from the consequences of a paralysing stroke that confines her to her bedroom. She lives on memories of her youth and of her family's past grandeur, and constantly complains about her unhappiness. As a young woman, Belinda was a ravishing beauty whose life and education, like Virginia's, was consecrated to the ideal of love as the only path to fulfilment. Also like Virginia, Belinda's romantic assumptions about marriage led her to an unsuitable union with an unworthy man, which awoke her to the cruel reality of a miserable existence without a possible way out of it. Philip D. Atteberry aptly summarises this point in *Ellen*

Glasgow: New Perspectives. The parallels he establishes between Belinda's and Virginia's marriages also illustrate my view that both women have been equally crippled and paralysed by patriarchy:

> Her [Belinda's] paralysing stroke symbolizes her incapacity to understand marriage or to deal with life . . . Virginia, of course, does not suffer physical paralysis, but her marital difficulties are much like Belinda's and, metaphorically, she is just as paralysed in her capacity to understand or deal with them.[116]

Susan Treadwell, on the other hand, represents everything that Virginia could have been, had she been aware of the warning that the two older women embody. She constitutes the example of a successful escape from the suffocating atmosphere of Victorian manners and morals, thanks to her intelligence and her strong personality. She has the courage of challenging her father and her society and looks for fulfilment through an active life in the public sphere, which echoes Glasgow's own struggle for self-realisation. Then a woman of forty, Glasgow created Susan as her spokesperson, but also as a pioneering image of a New Woman who can successfully combine professional and family life. She avoids her mother's fate through work and self-reliance, and even becomes a happy wife and mother without relinquishing her personal aspirations. Although Glasgow's main concern in the novel circles around Virginia's plight as a victim of conventional standards of femininity, Susan provides an early sketch of independent womanhood, which the author would fully develop in *Barren Ground* through the character of Dorinda Oakley.

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[116] Ibid., 126.

Virginia's process of destruction is thus shaped according to the Victorian ideal of selfless femininity into which the previous generation of women had been inflexibly moulded. Book First, entitled "The Dream", starts in Dinwiddie, a fictionalised version of Petersburg, Virginia, when the protagonist is in her early youth. She fulfils the prototype of the glorious brunette, who seems destined to the sublime mission of loving wife and mother. As Miss Priscilla, the local schoolteacher, admits, "if there was ever a girl who looked as if she were cut out for happiness, that was Jinny Pendleton". (*V*, 19) The first chapter introduces us to Miss Priscilla Batte and her school, the Dinwiddie Academy for Young Ladies. The school is based on the principle of venerating a past that is dead — that of the heroes of the Civil War and the values for which these heroes had fought and which they had died to preserve. Miss Priscilla herself is the daughter of a Confederate general who has neither the vocation nor the training for teaching, but this was one of the few ladylike occupations that constituted an alternative to parasitic spinsterhood at the time. She educates the girls according to a basic premise: the more paralysing the education, the better for the young lady in question. The following quotation from the opening chapter already indicates how difficult it is for a woman to escape a system of values so firmly rooted that the roles assigned to women seem to be appointed by nature rather than imposed by culture. As Barbro Ekman observes, "there is anger and indignation as well as irony in this description of the destruction of young life":[117]

> to go through life perpetually submitting her [Virginia's] opinions was, in the eyes of her parents and her teacher, the divinely appointed task of a woman. Her education was founded upon the simple theory that the less a girl knew about life, the better prepared she would be to contend with it. Knowledge of any sort . . . was kept from her as if it contained the germs of a contagious disease. And this ignorance of anything that could possibly be useful to her was supposed in some mysterious way to add to her value as a

[117] Barbro Ekman, *The End of a Legend: Ellen Glasgow's History of Southern Women* (Stockholm: Uppsala, 1979) 53.

> woman and to make her a more desirable companion to a man who . . . was expected "to know his world." (*V*, 16-17)

Glasgow's strong indictment against Southern patriarchy and its double sexual standard is made patently clear early in the novel. While she attacks the males who take advantage of women's ignorance to conceal their misconduct, she also condemns the women who, like Miss Priscilla, perpetuate the system by inculcating the principles of true womanhood in young women, thus making them vulnerable to male exploitation. At the closing of the chapter, and echoing Glasgow's dedication to her sister, Miss Priscilla asks herself, "Would life yield nothing more to that radiant girl than it had yielded to her or to the other women whom she had known?" (*V*, 19) Being instrumental in the perpetuation of tradition, Miss Priscilla questions for a moment the validity of the principles in which she indoctrinates girls like Virginia. Nevertheless, Miss Priscilla will not doubt the rightness of sacrificing Virginia for the sake of young Oliver Treadwell's spiritual salvation.[118] Glasgow's irony in voicing Miss Batte's thoughts is an obvious wink at the reader:

> [S]urely a girl like that – lovely, loving, unselfish to a fault, and trained from her infancy to excel in all the feminine virtues – surely, this perfect flower of sex specialization could have been designed by Providence only for the delight and sanctification of man. (*V*, 104)

Oliver himself believes that her purity will make him a better man, and sees her innocence and unselfish love as the reflection of his importance as a male. As the following excerpt from the novel shows, Glasgow pictures Virginia as an example of the Victorian cult of True Womanhood brought to its petrifying (and petrified) perfection. Echoing Miss Priscilla's discourse, Oliver regards her as a static ideal rather

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[118] Pamela Matthews also mentions this point. See Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 78-79.

than as a human being, selfless and ethereal, destined only for man's spiritual and moral elevation:

> To have her always gentle, always passive, never reaching out her hand, never descending to his level, but sitting forever aloof and colourless, waiting eternally, patient, beautiful and unwearied, to crown the victory – this was what the conquering male in him demanded . . . How perfectly her face expressed the goodness and gentleness of her soul! What a companion she would make to a man! What a lover! What a wife! Always soft, exquisite, tender, womanly to the innermost fibre of her being, and perfect in unselfishness as all womanly women are. How easy it would be to work if she were somewhere within call, ready to fly to him at a word! How glorious to go out into the world if she knew that she sat at home waiting – always waiting, with those eyes like wells of happiness, until he should return to her! (*V*, 118-120)

As has already been said, the irony that Glasgow uses in dealing with her characters is aimed at showing the blind idealism that pervades Virginia's world, and that will ultimately make her tragedy inevitable. As Philip Atteberry remarks, Miss Priscilla "is an obvious symbol of the decaying old order," but she also acts as a mirror to Virginia's future of isolation and paralysis, representing "the actual immobility that characterizes the adult Virginia."[119] Similarly, and despite his apparently liberal ideas, Oliver's unrealistic view of Virginia reveals his adherence to the "old order" Miss Priscilla represents. The standard of womanhood Virginia embodies, as Glasgow implies, provides a conveniently diminished female image in which to mirror his masculine ego.

Lucy Pendleton, Virginia's self-effacing mother, is another side character that Glasgow creates as a projection of Virginia's life. Like Miss Priscilla, she also momentarily doubts the values she has transmitted to her daughter, as they have not given her happiness. Nevertheless, like Miss Priscilla and Virginia herself, she is incapable of challenging a system of self-immolation she does not understand but which

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[119] Atteberry, 'The Framing of Glasgow's *Virginia',* 125.

she accepts as true. On the eve of Virginia's marriage to the intellectual, college-educated Oliver Treadwell, Mrs. Pendleton advises Virginia not to forget that her "strength" lies in her "gentleness", that her "first duty" is to her husband, and that "it's the woman's part to sacrifice herself." (*V*, 150) For a moment, though, Mrs. Pendleton's beliefs falter:

> In Mrs. Pendleton's soft, anxious eyes the shadow darkened, as if for the first time she had grown suspicious of the traditional wisdom which she was imparting. But this suspicion was so new and young that it could not struggle for existence against the archaic roots of her inherited belief in the Pauline measure of her sex. It was characteristic of her – and indeed of most women of her generation – that she would have endured martyrdom in support of the consecrated doctrine of her inferiority to man. (*V*, 150-151)

Book First closes with Oliver and Virginia's engagement, and Book Second, "The Reality", starts with their wedding. Virginia, in the bloom of her youth and beauty, is ecstatically looking forward to her marriage as the fulfilment of all her expectations and wishes. Kathryn Lee Seidl quotes Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* to point at the pernicious consequences of accepting the values of selflessness that have destroyed the women of the previous generation. As she posits,

> Glasgow and Godwin focus their novels on young women whose major task is to establish a sense of self that is independent of their culture. As Nancy Chodorow writes, our culture in general tends to endorse mothers who retain a close connection with their daughters so that the development of autonomous self becomes difficult . . . and leads to a mother's loss of self as well.[120]

As has been illustrated, Lucy Pendleton has effaced herself for her husband and daughter to the point of becoming an utterly selfless being. Although Glasgow clearly shows the consequences of that life in Mrs. Pendleton, Virginia regards her mother as an

[120] 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. 290. Quoted from Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988) pp. 211-212.

example to be followed rather than as a warning. Trained to become the ideal Southern lady, she never contemplates any other possible path than that of virtue and sacrifice, which her mother and past generations of women had trodden before her:

> 'He likes me to be religious, mother. He says the Church has cultivated the loveliest type of woman the world has ever seen.'
> 'Then by fulfilling that ideal you will please him best.'
> 'I shall try to be just what you have been to father – just as unselfish, just as devoted . . . Love is the only thing that really matters, isn't it, mother?'
> 'A pure and noble love, darling. It is a woman's life. God meant it so.'
> (*V*, 151)

> She thought of the daily excitement of marketing, of the perpetual romance of mending his clothes, of the glorified monotony of pouring his coffee, as an adventurer on sunrise seas might dream of the rosy islands of hidden treasure. And then, so perfectly did she conform in spirit to the classic ideal of her sex, her imagination ecstatically pictured her in the immemorial attitude of women. (*V*, 154)

Virginia's words are permeated with Glasgow's bitter-sweet irony: the ideal of married life that Virginia has been trained to cherish will soon clash with a reality that no one has prepared her to contend with. The irony in the narrative voice, although comic in its surface, is pervaded with a sense of tragedy. As in the case of Lucy Pendleton and Belinda Treadwell, Virginia's progressive awareness of her unhappiness is made the more tragic because her "intellectual limitations (together with the intellectual destitution of her environment)" incapacitate her and thus "place her fate beyond her control."[121]

Book Second deals with Virginia's married life and the early period of her motherhood. Glasgow follows the line of a female *bildungsroman* and transports the action from Dinwiddie to Matoaca City for seven years, the change in location implying the crucial

[121] Ibid., 124.

sexual experience that comes with marriage. From Matoaca City Virginia sends affectionate letters to her mother and tells her of her adaptation to the harsh reality of endless household duties, the discomforts of a small allowance, and the pains of childbirth.[122] During those years, Virginia becomes absorbed in her domestic tasks and cannot see the consequences of Oliver's frustrating job in his uncle's railroad company, Similarly, she does not understand his need for intelligent conversation in the evenings, for solitude while he writes his plays, or for reassurance when his play fails in New York:

> He doesn't know (for I never tell him) how very tired I am by the time night comes. Sometimes when Oliver comes home and we sit in the dining-room (we never use the drawing-room, because it is across the hall, and I'm afraid I shouldn't hear the baby cry), it is as much as I can do to keep my eyes open. I try not to let him notice it, but one night when he read me the first act of a play he is writing, I went to sleep, and though he didn't say anything, I could see that he was very much hurt . . . Work is a joy to me because I feel that I am doing it for Oliver and the baby. And with two such treasures to live for I should be the most ungrateful creature if I ever complained.
> (*V*, 173-175)

Oliver's erstwhile adoration for Virginia — or, more specifically, for Virginia's beauty — gradually becomes estrangement as her radiance is ravaged by continual sacrifice and self-effacement. Barbro Ekman argues that Oliver tries to make a companion of Virginia but "she insists on slaving for him and her children just as her

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[122] As opposed to the linear and androcentric progress of the hero in the traditional *bildungsroman*, the notion of the female *bildungsroman* springs from the rise of the novel (and the increasing mass of female readership) at the end of the eighteenth century. Following this tradition, many nineteenth-century women writers explored the development of their female characters in different ways, and twentieth-century feminist criticism has drawn attention to the genre. For example, Gilbert and Gubar analyse Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as a female *bildungsroman*.: see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'A Dialogue of Self and Soul: Plain Jane's Progress', in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) 336-371. Feminist scholars use different terms and definitions to define the female *bildungsroman*: Rita Felski, for example, calls it "novel of self-discovery." See Felski, 'The Novel of Self-Discovery: Integration and Quest', in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) pp. 122-153. For further discussion on the origins and characteristics of the female *bildungsroman* in Britain, see Lorna Ellis, 'Gender, Development and the *Bildungsroman*', in *Appearing to Diminish: Female Development in the British Bildungsroman, 1750-1850* (London: Associated University Presses, 1999) pp. 15-42.

mother did before her", never realising that Oliver "is not interested in domesticity."[123] Although I partly agree with Ekman, he seems to blame Virginia for her husband's behaviour when, to my mind, she is only assuming her responsibilities as wife and mother as she has been trained to do. In Ekman's view, Oliver seems justified in his attitude because "she stops caring about her appearance", and "having no real fondness for children, [he] complains that she thinks more of her child than of him."[124] Her monosyllabic responses and her intellectual shallowness (for Virginia, of course, like any true Southern lady, only lives through her emotions), which had formerly seemed adorable to him, are now the agents of Oliver's irritation and his progressive indifference towards her. One of the ironies of the novel is precisely that Oliver knows Virginia's limitations from the very beginning:[125] it is a change in Oliver's attitude and not in Virginia's personality that ruins their married life. Actually, one of the most pernicious consequences of Virginia's paralysing upbringing precisely lies in her inability to change.

At a certain moment in the novel, Oliver criticises Virginia's neglected hands, in comparison to Abby Goode's "pretty" hands. The double sexual standard operating in the South accounts for the contradictory notion that allows men to worship their angelic wives, while they can be sexually attracted to other less angelic women at the same time. While Oliver's growing interest in Jinny's frivolous and fun-loving childhood friend is made patent, Virginia keeps being her husband's ideal. The scene, as many others throughout the novel, shows the source of Virginia's victimisation: after she has blindly accepted and internalised the Victorian standards of male-defined womanhood,

[123] Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, 54.

[124] Ibid., 55.

[125] Linda W. Wagner also highlights this idea. See Wagner, *Ellen Glasgow: Beyond Convention* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982) 44.

she is abandoned on her pedestal. According to Matthews, irony turns into tragedy when, after draining their youth, men get tired of the women who have most fulfilled the ideal they have created. As Glasgow herself ironically comments in her book of prefaces, "Virginia was more than a woman; she was the embodiment of a forsaken ideal . . . and even man, who had created her out of his own desire, has grown a trifle weary of the dream-images he had made." (*CM*, 82) Paradoxically, Oliver is never blamed for his indifference towards his wife and his flirtation with Abby Goode; Virginia is the one who constantly struggles to adapt to the ideal woman she believes Oliver desires:

> 'It is my fault. I am too settled. I am letting my youth go,' she said, with a passionate determination to catch her girlhood and hold it fast before it eluded her forever. 'I am only twenty-eight, and I dress like a woman of forty.' . . . All life was for men, and only a few radiant years of it were given to women. Men were never too old to love, to pursue and capture whatever joy the fugitive instant might hold for them. But women, though they were allowed only one experience out of the whole of life, were asked to resign even that one at the very minute when they needed it most. (*V*, 238-239)

Glasgow here expresses her anger at the assumption that men can have many interests in life while women must remain contented living only for love, which implies that they are destined to a lifetime of unhappiness if their marriage turns out to be a failure or (worse) if they remain single.[126]

As Philip D. Atteberry observes, "when Oliver and Virginia marry, illness becomes an integral part of the plot and helps chart the deterioration of their diseased relationship," while "Susan represents an image of physical and intellectual vitality that contrasts with Virginia."[127] The counterpart to Virginia's life is her childhood friend Susan Treadwell, Oliver's cousin, with whom she maintains a lifelong attachment. Susan, Glasgow's

[126] Barbro Ekman also comments on this point. See Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, 54.
[127] Atteberry, 'The Framing of Glasgow's *Virginia'*, 128.

voice to my mind, acts as Virginia's double as well as her opposite. Although both girls have been brought up exactly in the same way, Susan seems to voice Glasgow's view that there is an alternative to the paralysis that True Womanhood entails. She is able to escape the consequences of the shallow education she has received thanks to her intelligence and her inquisitive attitude towards life, so atypical of a 'true' Southern girl. Susan is not as lovely as Virginia is, but possesses the courage and the strength of mind that the latter lacks, thus achieving a fulfilling life and considerable happiness without ceasing to be a lady.

When her tyrannical father Cyrus Treadwell refuses to send her to college, Susan manages to educate herself and look for a meaningful occupation outside the home. Unlike Virginia, she is sceptical towards romantic love when everyone regards her as hopeless for remaining single after twenty-five, especially since she is not particularly beautiful. Instead of desperately trying to find a husband, she waits for John Henry to overcome his youthful infatuation for Virginia's beauty and consider her as a worthy companion. Unlike Oliver and Virginia, Susan and John Henry "represent a healthy marriage"[128]: Susan loves her husband and children as well as her mother, but she never lets them absorb her completely. Although Susan pities and even somewhat despises her invalid mother, she refuses to abandon her for the sake of John Henry, and asks him to move to the Treadwell household instead. She never asks her father for permission to get married, but merely informs him of her intentions of staying home with John Henry. The same iron-veined self-reliance that helps her to confront her father is paradoxically inherited from him: like Cyrus, Susan never stops until she achieves her goals. This characteristic is curiously parallel to the vein of iron Glasgow believed she had inherited from her father's Scottish ancestry, which she also used to defy his authority.

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[128] Ibid., 129.

Just as Ellen Glasgow expressed her rejection of her parents' loveless marriage, Susan represents the opposite of her parents' relationship. Cyrus Treadwell represents the man of the New South; he is the owner of the railroad company, the tobacco factory, and the bank. He is seen by Dinwiddians as a "great man" because of his wealth, although he represents everything that is evil and repulsive. Glasgow pictured Cyrus as a fictional copy of her father Francis Glasgow who, behind a façade of strict religious principles, abused his wife and children and had sexual relationships with the black servants. Similarly, Cyrus tyrannises his wife and children in order to get some cruel pleasure from his miserable marriage. An instance of his cruelty is that he tries to prevent the seamstress Miss Willy Whitlow, his wife Belinda's only friend, from visiting her when Belinda suffers from an illness that keeps her an invalid in her room. He also refuses to send Susan to college on the grounds that it would be a waste of money.

Cyrus lives a double-standard life by satisfying his sexual urges with his mulatto lover, the servant Mandy, who bears him a son, Jubal. His outmost act of wickedness, as Linda Wagner contends in her introduction to the 1989 edition to the novel, (*V,* xv) comes when he refuses to save his son's life when he is accused of murdering a white policeman. Glasgow equates sexual and racial oppression in Virginia through the character of Cyrus Treadwell: he uses his status as a patriarch to denigrate both his family and Mandy and make them submissive to his will. Here Glasgow presents marriage and slavery as closely connected, as both systems are the product of white male definitions of others' experiences. Oliver is comparable to his uncle Cyrus in the fact that he also abandons his wife for another woman once she loses her bloom and is never judged for that. Some years after his flirtation with Abby Goode, he becomes a

successful playwright in New York and he falls madly in love with the young and intelligent actress who stars in his plays, Margaret Oldcastle.

Book Third of the novel is entitled "The Adjustment" and deals with Virginia's middle age. Her eldest daughter Lucy is about to marry a widower, and her son Harry and her youngest daughter Jenny are in college. Looking at her once beautiful but now reddened and knotted hands, she sees a copy of her mother's hands, as if all the hands of the women before her were tied in an invisible chain of submission to the glorious tradition of the genteel woman, "a single pair in that chain of pathetic hands that had worked in the exacting service of Love." (*V*, 230) Glasgow's bitterly ironic statement again presents an image that draws marriage close to slavery. While she has been petrified in the past, sharing with her mother and all the women who have come before her the same principles of duty and self-sacrifice, her daughters both pity her and despise her for her old-fashioned attitude. Both her parents are dead, and Oliver spends most of the time in New York working on the rehearsal of his plays. With her children gone and her husband completely indifferent to her, she feels empty and old when she is barely forty. One night, as she accompanies Oliver to New York for the presentation of a new play, she is devastated when she overhears gossip in the theatre that forces her to face the cruel reality that the years of sacrifice and self-denial have doomed her to virtual inexistence:

> That's Treadwell over there – a good-looking man, isn't he? – but have you seen the dowdy, middle-aged woman he is married to? It's a pity that all great men marry young; and now they say, you know, that he is madly in love with Margaret Oldcastle – (*V*, 356)

Ironically, the womanly woman who gives up everything for the fulfilment of the ideal expected of her is not rewarded with happiness, as Virginia dreamt in her girlhood, but condemned to paralysis and frustration.

Oliver finally asks Virginia for divorce and, though her whole world is falling to pieces, she is incapable of fighting with sexual weapons and winning back her husband. Another of Glasgow's ironies in the novel is that the code of genteel behaviour does not contemplate sexual needs as appropriate in a woman, while Virginia could only satisfy these in her married life. Nevertheless, having been trained to lead a selfless existence as the only possible one, she is incapable of confronting Oliver and his lover or even being angry with him. Virginia, again like her mother and Glasgow's own mother, can do nothing but follow the dictates of the system that has destroyed her, as the author explains in *A Certain Measure*: "even in the supreme crisis of her life she could not lay down the manner of a lady [and] she smiled the grave smile with which her mother had walked through a ruined country." (*CM*, 93)

At the end of the novel, Virginia stands at the threshold of her house — metaphorically the threshold between past and future, as Matthews points out[129] — incapable of finding a meaning to the rest of her life. Accustomed always to look back or not to look at all, she sees her future as empty without anyone to define the limits and purpose of her existence. The final sentence announcing her son Harry's return from college — "Dearest Mother, I am coming home to you," (*V*, 392) — suggests that the only possible option for Virginia is the displacement of patriarchal subjection from father to son.[130] The sheltered life which Glasgow abhors and repeatedly denounces,

[129] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 86.
[130] Louis Auchincloss makes an interesting reflection on Glasgow's final scene, by suggesting that Virginia might become another of Glasgow's 'Angel(a)s': "One does not feel that it is quite fair of Miss Glasgow to leave

does not only make women think themselves old long before the menopause, but paradoxically prevents them from reaching social, economic, emotional and psychological maturity.

Virginia's incapability of facing the truth about her divorce contrasts with her sudden awareness of her unhappiness; life becomes devoid of meaning for her once she realises her husband has ceased to love her. She sacrificed her life and her soul, as Blair Rouse puts it, "on an altar dedicated to Love and Beauty,"[131] and she was denied both. By trying to ignore ugliness and evil around her, she suddenly finds herself surrounded by nothing but ugliness and evil. As Ekman points out, Glasgow created Virginia not as an individual victim of a concrete situation, but as a figure who "represents all women through the ages who have been destroyed by masculine dominance."[132] Oliver Treadwell is the typical Southern male who, although not essentially wicked, destroys the ideal he has created as soon as it becomes a human being. Thus, as Glasgow seems to conclude, the sublime rose of womanly perfection that Virginia and many other women in the American South represent, sheltered from life and made to breathe the suffocating hothouse air of 'domestic bliss', is condemned to wither as soon as she flourishes.

The tragedy of the Southern Belle "in the days of her terrifying perfection", as Blair Rouse points out, lies in the fact that she has been formed "in an inflexible mould,"[133] and thus is unable to develop any ideas that do not conform to the ideal she has been trained to fulfil. Even though Glasgow surrounds Virginia with examples of selfless women from the preceding generation (Miss Priscilla, Lucy Pendleton, and Belinda Treadwell) whose lives have been crushed by their adherence to this ideal, she does not seem to realise about her own fate. Only the friendship of Susan Treadwell provides her with comfort, although the example of self-

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us on this enigmatic note. Might Virginia not become a worse fiend than Mrs. Gay and ruin Harry's life by a possessiveness disguised as unselfishness?" His hypothesis is indeed thought-provoking. See Louis Auchincloss, *Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965) 71.

[131] Blair Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962) 114.
[132] Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, 59.
[133] Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, 77-79.

realisation of this assertive New Woman does not help her either. Despite the gloomy ending of the novel, Glasgow views female friendships as healing and empowering for women and stresses the importance of the bonds between women of different generations and social classes.

In *Virginia*, Glasgow seems to acknowledge her mother's inheritance and thus establishes a link with women's traditions. Through the portrait of Virginia Pendleton, The author appeared to come to terms with the part of herself her mother represented: the selfless and sterile life of an invalid, shaped by the patriarchal standards she abhorred, as well as the nurturing world of female affiliation she needed. Those bonds of affection and support would be crucial to her both as a writer and as a woman — she would develop these ideas more fully in *Barren Ground* —, allowing herself and her female characters to relate with others while retaining her own selfhood or, as Matthews puts it,[134] to "merge" and "emerge" at the same time.

[134] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 20.

5.3. Experiments: the Short Stories (1916-1924).

The true realists, I felt, must illuminate experience, not merely transcribe it; and so, for my own purpose, I defined the art of fiction as experience illuminated.
(CM, 14)

In a time when writing 'serious' fiction meant writing as a man, it cost Glasgow years to reconcile her identity as an individual and as a writer with what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg would call "the female world of love and ritual", which was to be the core of her most celebrated novels.[135] Glasgow's longest and most important relationships were those she maintained with other women, a fact which she reflects in many of her major works of fiction and in her short stories.

Glasgow wrote short stories basically because of the additional income they provided, although that does not diminish their importance. As Stephanie R. Branson contends, "Glasgow's short stories have not received the attention they deserve because of this minor status and because they are also feminist fictions."[136] Through her short fiction, Ellen Glasgow explores and experiments with the major themes she was to develop in subsequent novels, plus giving vent to her personal anxieties. Glasgow also used the

[135] Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, 'The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America', in *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1985) 53-77.
[136] Stephanie R. Branson, "'Experience Illuminated": Veristic Representation in Glasgow's Short Stories', in Dorothy M. Scura, ed., *Ellen Glasgow: New Perspectives* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995) 74.

condensed format of the short story to reassess her own self while encompassing it with traditions of womanhood her mother's generation had shared and towards which she had always been hostile. In her short fiction, she consistently denounces the devastating effects that patriarchal strictures cause in her female characters. The ideal of True Womanhood, which immobilises women into a fixed male-defined conception of femininity, sometimes causing physical or mental invalidism and effectively invalidating women as autonomous beings.

Every one of Glasgow's stories explores the conflicting relationships between men and women, especially within marriage. She contrasts the often-debilitating effects marriage has for women with the potentially more fulfilling alternative of female bonding. However, the fact that Glasgow decided to use the supernatural element to illustrate these views in some of her stories took me to classify them according to the presence or the absence of this element. Hence, the stories are divided in two groups: 'Gothic Stories' and 'Marriage Stories.'

According to this classification, the Gothic stories would be "The Shadowy Third" (1916), "Dare's Gift" (1917), "The Past" (1920), "Whispering Leaves" (1923) and "Jordan's End" (1923). 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). Apart from the above mentioned, Glasgow wrote "A Point in Morals" (1899), a story in which she does not deal with male-female relationships but with ethical issues. This quite disturbing exploration of the morality

behind the act of helping someone to die is indeed a rarity, and almost borders on the philosophical. For this reason, and since "A Point in Morals" does not shed light on my analysis of the female invalid, I finally decided not to take it into account.

5.3.1. Gothic Stories.

> *Glasgow's stories contain numinous or marvellous elements such as pathetic fallacy and ghosts . . . These elements differentiate the stories from conventional realist texts, even from Glasgow's own novels, which are less experimental.*[137]

As Tamar Heller poses in her reflections about Mary Wollstonecraft's Gothic fiction, Wollstonecraft borrows Anne Radcliffe's conventions of the female Gothic to portray what she calls "the wrongs of woman."[138] Women's imprisonment, she contends, does not end with the escape from the haunted castle; actually, Gothic fiction cannot fully convey the horrors of women's oppressive reality. Wollstonecraft focuses on mothers and daughters, and emphasises the circle of powerlessness that evidences the daughter's inability to escape her mother's fate. Madness is part of a system that exiles and dispossesses women but, at the same time, it expresses the terror and anger they experience within patriarchal social arrangements, especially marriage. The incoherent language of the madwoman voices female rebellion against the hegemonic discourse of reason, anticipating the concept of *écriture féminine* and, more specifically,

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[137] Ibid., 76.
[138] Tamar Heller, *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992) 25-29.

Kristeva's theories about the revolutionary effects of the Semiotic within the Symbolic order, thus disrupting what Lacan terms as "the Law of the Father".[139]

According to Anne Williams, the female Gothic explores the secret chambers in the Father's castle and offers the possibility of expressing a female self partially outside this law, or even of spelling out a new one.[140] As Williams poses, the confusion of the boundaries of ordinary reality — self/other, past/present, reality/fantasy — reveal a looking-glass world where assumptions of the female as the persistent "other" are reversed and the patriarchal principles of unity and chronology give way to a multiplicity of voices that would otherwise have been silenced. Both Heller and Williams argue that the female Gothic replaces unity for duality/multiplicity, and Heller especially emphasises the power of female solidarity to transform oppressive stories within the domestic.[141] The "nightmare of repetition" Irigaray envisages as the inescapable fate of daughters is transformed in the female Gothic in a positive heritage between mothers and daughters of different classes.[142] The multiplicity of mother figures and mother substitutes thus anticipates a better future for daughters within a community

[139] Ruth Robbins, *Literary Feminisms* (London: Macmillan, 2000) 103-185. According to Lacan, the Symbolic order stands for "the Law of the Father": authority, logic, intelligence, language. In contrast, the Semiotic is that which is experienced and known but nevertheless resists rationalisation. The Chora is the borderline that blurs the boundaries between these two.

[140] Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of the Gothic* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995) 135-141.

[141] See Heller's 'Radcliffean Gothic: Terror and the Daughter' and 'Maria: Feminist Gothic' in *Dead Secrets,* 17-29, and Williams' 'The Fiction of Feminine Desires: Not the Mirror but the Lamp' in *Art of Darkness,* 149-159.

[142] Gerardine Meaney, *(Un)Like Subjects: Women, Theory, Fiction*. (London: Routledge, 1993) 21-26. Meaney's reflections on motherhood, which she quotes partly from the French feminist theoretician Luce Irigaray, identify the figures of mother and daughter as almost interchangeable. In Irigaray's words, the daughter is the mother's 'non-identical double', mirroring her experience as discriminated and "lacking."

of women, and the recovery of that heritage precisely constitutes one of the main concerns in Ellen Glasgow's Gothic tales, as Matthews argues in her brilliant discussion

of Glasgow's Gothic stories:

> [f]ive Gothic stories, written between 1916 and 1923, openly address the difficulties of reinventing stories for women. This time using not only personal women's traditions but also a literary tradition associated predominately with women writers and characters (and readers) in order to imagine tradition as it affects women.[143]

Glasgow probably felt at ease in a genre which was popular among women and feminised in a number of ways: its popularity and its association with female readers (and writers) mimicked Victorian gender and class hierarchies, and thus it was commonly seen as "other", subversive and marginal. As Matthews poses, Glasgow chose the Gothic tale — a genre which at that time lacked respectability, as it was associated with a largely female tradition of "popular" (that is, not "serious") fiction — in order to subvert male authority and offer an alternative to male representations of women's traditions.[144] The tradition of the female Gothic provided Glasgow with a valuable tool to (re)define women's stories and, at the same time, to define her individual self. The reassessment of those traditions is central to the five Gothic stories this section deals with, "The Shadowy Third" (1916), "Dare's Gift" (1917), "The Past" (1920), "Whispering Leaves" (1923) and "Jordan's End" (1923).

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[143] Pamela Matthews, *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Traditions* (Charlottesville and London: the University Press of Virginia, 1994) 107.

[144] Ibid., 113. Stephanie R. Branson also notes that Glasgow's stories "represent a special form of social commentary running contrary to what can be seen as the dominant discourses of realistic and modernist fiction." See Branson, "'Experience Illuminated": Veristic Representation in Glasgow's Short Stories', 75.

According to Pamela Matthews, Glasgow made sure that she dissociated herself from the "unnecessary violent and even perverse fiction of, for example, Faulkner",[145] although her five stories follow the basic Gothic plot: the house as an imprisoning, almost suffocating setting, the female protagonist trapped within its walls, the threatening male, and a mystery which most of the times surrounds a supernatural figure or event. As Matthews poses, the boundaries between life and death are often blurred, especially for the few characters (usually female) who seem to be aware of the mystery, but the most significant confusion takes places between female self and other. Chris Wiesenthal interestingly establishes a link between ghost stories and madness, while he remarks on the genre's representation of the uncanny as a marker of the indistinctiveness between self and other:

> either as subjective and delusory projections of the psyche, or as objectively based perceptions (often connected to the supernatural), phantasmal manifestations register in a particularly profound way another level of indeterminacy between the inside and out.[146]

In Glasgow's stories, the psychological and emotional identification that occurs between the female characters (generally the invalid and her helper) often renders them indistinguishable. In *Somatic Fictions*, Athena Vrettos highlights the Victorian tendency to interpret the female body as a manifestation of women's emotions, illness often becoming the expression

[145] Ibid., 108.

[146] Chris Wiesenthal, *Figuring Madness in Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1997) 11.

of emotional distress.[147] As one can infer from Glasgow's statement in her book of prefaces, her attempt in writing Gothic fiction may not have been only to give a faithful description of the inferior position of women in patriarchal society, but also to offer an insight into women's hearts:

> [t]he whole truth must embrace the interior world as well as external appearances. Behaviour alone is only the outer envelope of personality; and this is why documentary realism, the notebook style, has produced merely surface impressions. (*CM*, 28)

Rather than isolating her protagonist in the house, Glasgow provides her Gothic heroine with the help of another woman, a female double who truly identifies with the sufferer and becomes the sole interpreter of her troubled emotional state. In these stories, the house represents the imprisoning and the silencing of women within a name and a space which is not their own, but in which they are supposed to reign as angels of purity and innocence. As Matthews suggests, Glasgow uses her Gothic tales to denounce and challenge the nightmarish reality women of her time were disciplined to assume every day as desirable and proper, "since 'normal' . . . is likely to mean, among other commonplace horrors, female idealization and objectification, domestic imprisonment, and [an] inadequate self-worth."[148]

In the five stories mentioned above, different forms of neuralgia serve Glasgow as cultural symbols to denounce social, medical and moral attitudes towards women, which push them into unnatural states of invalidism. Glasgow herself never had much of a social life during her

[147] See Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995) 15.

[148] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 109.

childhood and early youth, as her delicate constitution and her recurring migraine headaches kept her almost permanently at home. Other members in the Glasgow family were also entrapped by Victorian notions of womanhood and double moral standards, which rendered them invalids in various degrees. Glasgow's mother spent her last years as an invalid, as previous sections have already mentioned. Similarly, her sister Cary inherited her mother's uterine problems (at that time it was generally thought by medical men that there was a direct connection between women's

reproductive organs and their brain, a fact that seriously affected their mental health)[149] and spent most of her adult life feeling inferior and unworthy of her dead husband. Crushing personal experiences, together with the author's interest in new psychology, helped Glasgow shape her invalid characters and give them voices, so that the stories of so many women she had known and loved could be rewritten.

* * *

"The Shadowy Third", like many other fictional pieces by Glasgow, is a story about (surrogate) mothers and daughters. It presents a young professional, Margaret Randolph, hired by Dr. Maradick as the personal nurse of his wife, who seems to be suffering from strange mental disorders. Roland Maradick, the chief surgeon at the hospital, is the traditional

[149] See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg's *Disorderly Conduct,* 206. As Smith-Rosenberg states, "[m]any nineteenth-century critics felt that this emotional regression and instability were rooted in woman's very nature . . . Most commonly, a woman's emotional states generally, and hysteria in particular, were believed to have the closest ties to her reproductive cycle."

powerful male, whose irresistible charm infatuates the protagonist. Glasgow here satirises about the romantic ideal of the Prince Charming, which women were (and still are) socialised into believing. An extremely handsome man and a brilliant surgeon, as Branson contends, he ideally should "protect and enchant the women who came in contact with him . . . in actuality Dr. Maradick is a cold blooded villain who destroys the woman who loves him."[150] As corresponds to the Gothic villain as defined by Heller, his romantic appeal equates his love of power, and his charm becomes a weapon to exert control over, even tyrannise, the women around him:[151] "[h]e was, I suppose, born to be a hero to women. Fate had selected him for the rôle, and it would have been sheer impertinence for a mortal to cross wills with the invisible Powers." (*CSS*, 53)

Maradick trusts his sexual power and his authority as a doctor to assure Margaret's obedience, but she will soon ally herself with his wife instead. The superintendent Miss Hemphill, Margaret's surrogate mother at the hospital, warns her not to involve in cases, as that does not fit a predominantly male professional world. Nevertheless, even before she meets Mrs. Maradick, she cannot help to "feel her pathos and her strangeness." (*CSS,* 55). The house on Fifth Avenue where the Maradicks live acts as the modern version of the haunted castle, where Mrs. Maradick is literally imprisoned as a madwoman. Unlike Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, she is not locked exactly in the attic, to use Gilbert and Gubar's words, but in her third storey room. The house is a source of conflict as well, as Mrs. Maradick

[150] Branson, "'Experience Illuminated": Veristic Representation in Glasgow's Short Stories', 81.

[151] Heller, *Dead Secrets*, 18.

refuses to abandon her mother's home in spite of her husband's pressures. Although according to the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres, Mrs. Maradick's only power resides in the domestic, her husband reminds her of her powerlessness by turning her house into a prison. Besides, his professional authority serves him to justify his wife's nervous disorders and keep her under constant threat of permanent removal to an asylum.

Having seen a little girl playing in the library on her arrival at the house, Margaret imagines that Mrs. Maradick's hallucination consists in thinking her daughter Dorothea is dead, although later on she learns that only herself and Gabriel, the black butler whom Mrs. Maradick's mother brought from South Carolina, can see the girl.[152] Later, the source of Mrs. Maradick's malady seems to be that she sees the ghost of Dorothea, who died from pneumonia, although Margaret is sure she has seen the girl too. Margaret's instinctive identification with Mrs. Maradick recalls Glasgow's assertion of female bonds of mutual affection and understanding — "There was something about her . . . that made you love her as soon as she looked at you" (*CSS,* 59) — contrasting with the objectification and loss of selfhood that characterises male-female relationships — "I felt I would have died for him." (*CSS,* 57)

Mrs. Maradick's incoherent phrases voice her terror at the isolation, powerlessness and victimisation she has suffered under male authority, which warns Margaret against the perils of marriage. Through Mrs.

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[152] I presume Glasgow includes a male character among those who support Mrs. Maradick's version because Gabriel's situation is also one of subservience and thus feminised in a number of ways. As well as being a reminder of Mrs. Maradick's matrilineal heritage, his race and position as a paid employee imply oppression by white patriarchy, and thus align him with Mrs. Maradick's victimisation in the household.

Maradick (even her name is reduced to that), Margaret learns that marriage leaves women dispossessed of name, property, financial control, and even personal independence and identity. According to the tradition of the female Gothic as defined by Tamar Heller, the domestic ideal, according to which the husband protects and provides for his wife, is here reversed into the crushing reality of harsh capitalism and women's legal helplessness, which allow the husband to control his wife's property.[153] Maradick's plan of appropriating his wife's property and money, transmitted through matrilineage, requires the elimination of her daughter so that he will be left as the sole beneficiary of her inheritance. After confining his wife to an asylum, where she dies, he is free to marry his former lover and sell the house to be transformed in an apartment block.

After Mrs. Maradick leaves for the asylum, Margaret stops seeing the girl and leads a methodical life as Maradick's office nurse, until she almost convinces herself that her encounters with Dorothea have been an optical illusion. One evening, while repeating a poem that Mrs. Maradick liked, Dorothea reappears. The girl, her mother's exact copy and, to rephrase Luce Irigaray's concept, her mother's identical double,[154] returns when Margaret remembers her emotional bonds with Mrs. Maradick. Despite Dorothea's apparent powerlessness and her inability to escape her mother's house (that is, her literal entrapment within the domestic), "the nightmare of repetition" is broken by cooperation with Margaret, now her surrogate mother. Even as a ghost, she is able to defend the matrilineal heritage that Mrs. Maradick left and cause Dr. Maradick to die by tripping with her skipping rope and falling

[153] Heller, *Dead Secrets*, 20.

[154] See footnote 8 in this section.

down three flights of stairs. As Branson notes, "the story ends with this gift of God becoming an angel of death for Dr. Maradick."[155] What Margaret calls "an invisible judgement" (*CSS,* 72) is, according to Pamela Matthews, Maradick's punishment for overestimating his power as a male and underestimating the power of a community of women unwilling to submit to his "charming way with women." (*CSS*, 57) As Virginia Woolf puts it in "Professions For Women",[156] the "angel in the house" he condemned to invalidism and death, the child he himself killed, and his apparently devoted subordinate acquire enough strength to defeat him. Ironically, Matthews remarks, at the end of the story he becomes "as dead — and as powerless — as other such 'angels' have been." [157]

* * *

"Dare's Gift" is one of the two Gothic stories in which Glasgow offers the perspective of a male narrator. Harold Beckwith is a corporation lawyer from Washington whose devoted wife Mildred is (again) being treated by a reputed nerve specialist. Here, as Pamela Matthews argues, the struggle to find women's voices is harder: Mildred's story is not told by herself but mediated by her husband.[158] Again, language acts in this story as an instrument of patriarchal power, as Harold's version of the events could be wrong but must be accepted as true. After her "first nervous breakdown",

[155] Branson, "'Experience Illuminated": Veristic Representation in Glasgow's Short Stories', 81.
[156] Virginia Woolf, "Professions For Women" in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol.2 (New York: Norton, 1986) 2006-2010.

[157] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 123.
[158] Ibid., 124.

(*CSS,* 90) the great specialist Dr. Drayton recommends Harold to send his wife away from Washington so that she might recover her health. As it happens in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper", the usual prescription for Mildred's nervous disorder is to send her to the country where she can be again corseted in the domestic, away from the excessive activity of Washington and isolated from the male world of professions in the public sphere. The subtle message behind the prescription, Matthews poses, "is that Mildred need only be reminded of her proper place, and emotional health will follow."[159] Glasgow portrays Mildred — of course, in Harold's eyes — as the perfect wife, whose devotion and self-effacement is praised by Harold's friend Harrison:

> 'Well, I'll ask Mildred. Of course Mildred must have the final word in the matter.'
> 'As if Mildred's final word would be anything but a repetition of yours!' Harrison laughed slyly - for the perfect harmony in which we lived had been for ten years a pleasant jest among our friends. Harrison had once classified wives as belonging to two distinct groups - the group of those who talked and knew nothing about their husbands' affairs, and the group of those who knew everything and kept silent. Mildred, he had added politely, had chosen to belong to the latter division. (*CSS*, 94-95)

As Matthews points out, what Harold defines as "perfect harmony" in marriage — "Never once . . . had she failed to share a single one of *my* enthusiasms" (*CSS*, 95; emphasis added) — testifies to her complete subordination to him. Her "wifely perfection is thus described in terms of her silence; the quality that defines success in a wife inscribes her inability to speak for herself."[160]

[159] Ibid., 126.

[160] Ibid., 126.

After a hunting visit to Harrison's estate in Virginia, he comes across an old colonial house that he resolves to rent for the next spring. Dare's Gift is owned by a Mr. Duncan who lives in California and wants to get rid of the house as soon as possible, as his faithful assistant had run away with an enormous amount of money a few months after they had moved and the house brings painful memories to him. Harold learns that story from the present tenant, who takes care of the house until it is sold again; she is waiting for a divorce sentence after her husband deserted her and her children. He ran away with her sister a few months after she came to live at Dare's Gift, although apparently they had known each other for many years and "he'd never taken any particular notice of her till they moved over here." (*CSS*, 92) It seems that Dare's Gift has hosted many stories of betrayal which started with the first Dare, Sir Roderick, who took part in Bacon's Rebellion but then betrayed his leader.

Harold rents the house and spends two weeks there with Mildred, and he is happy to see that she becomes enthusiastic about the garden and gradually recovers her bloom. Nevertheless, the conflict in Mildred can be predicted from her impressions on arriving at Dare's Gift — "It is just as if we had stepped into another world . . . I feel as if I had ceased to be myself since I left Washington." (*CSS,* 97) Thus, the quiet and submissive Mildred who left Washington, Glasgow seems to suggest, is about to break her silence. Harold goes to Washington and leaves his wife alone at Dare's Gift, as he has to offer legal advice in a complicated affair concerning a big company, the Atlantic and Eastern Railroad, which seems to be involved in a serious case of corruption. After Harold discovers some compromising

documents which prove the existence of illegal transactions in the company, he returns to Dare's Gift and talks it over with Mildred, who seems to have grown more irritable and restless. Two days later, while Harold is on the train back from Washington, he finds all the dirty secrets of the Atlantic and Eastern Railroad published in big headlines, secrets that only he and Mildred could have known. Since the article in the newspaper repeats almost exactly the words Harold had been saying to his wife two nights before, he can have no doubt that his previously discreet and calm wife has betrayed him:

> Mildred's disposition, I had once said, was as flawless as her profile - and I had for the first time in my life that baffled sensation which comes to men whose perfectly normal wives reveal flashes of abnormal psychology. Mildred wasn't Mildred, that was the upshot of my conclusions; and, hang it all! I didn't know any more than Adam what was the matter with her.
> (*CSS*, 100)

It is revealing to see how Harold feels baffled because his apparently conventional and silent wife has suddenly spoken against him, and how he quickly interprets her rebellion as insanity. Again, the traditional belief that women who *dare* (allowing the pun on words) are considered unnatural and deviant is recreated in the story through Harold's comparison of Mildred's betrayal with Eve's. In the same way Adam was puzzled by Eve's decision to bite the apple from the Tree of Knowledge, Glasgow suggests, Harold cannot understand why Mildred is suddenly dissatisfied with her passive role.

When he arrives at Dare's Gift, his friend Harrison has already called a local doctor and a nurse, as Mildred seems to be out of her mind and refuses to see him. When he finally asks her about the matter, she answers coldly that she had to tell all she knew and seems to rejoice at her betrayal:

"I couldn't keep it back any longer. No, don't touch me. You must not touch me. I had to do it. I would do it again." (*CSS*, 103) Mildred's version of Harold's story, made public through the newspapers, can be read as Mildred's revenge on Harold for ten years of silence, an outlet to the terror and rage she — and, presumably, all women — experience within patriarchal social arrangements. Her open defiance, her calm and determined look and her lack of remorse, Harold thinks, can only be the consequence of madness: "Then it was, while she stood there, straight and hard, and rejoiced because she had betrayed me — then it was that I knew that Mildred's mind was unhinged." (*CSS*, 103)

Through old Dr. Lakeby, Harold learns that Mildred's insanity is caused by the supernatural influence of the house and the memories of past betrayals it contains. He advises him to take Mildred back to Washington immediately, thus contradicting Dr. Drayton's recommendations of a peaceful and domestic retirement in the country as the best treatment for her illness. Here Glasgow ironically reasserts her distrust of medical practitioners to understand female emotional and psychological needs.

As Harold does with Mildred, Matthews poses, Dr. Lakeby appropriates the power to tell Lucy Dare's story, but fails to understand her.[161] Though Richard K. Meeker considers Dr. Lakeby as Miss Glasgow's spokesman in his editorial note to the story, (*CSS*, 118) I agree with Pamela Matthews' view that Lakeby's trustworthiness as a narrator is questioned by Glasgow. Given her opinion of doctors — especially of psychiatrists — as it

[161] Ibid., 127.

is reflected in her autobiography and in her fiction, Matthews' point of view seems more plausible. To my mind, Lakeby's point of view reminds the reader of the typically detached and authoritative view of the psychiatrist of the period, as a contrast to the more sympathetic care of the female nurse that Margaret Randolph personifies in "The Shadowy Third".

According to Lakeby's version, Mildred was a victim of the same atmosphere that surrounded the story of Lucy Dare, the last member of the family, who was thought to have died but still lives at a nursing home. During the last days of the Civil War, Lucy and her father, a retired general, had given the last remains of their fortune and their estate to the Confederate cause and blindly believed in the victory of the South. Lucy's pale and emaciated appearance recalls the aesthetics of the starving anorexic displaying an extreme manifestation of hyper-feminine self-sacrifice.[162] Instead of pitiable, Dr. Lakeby cannot but remember her as strangely attractive and describes her according to the Victorian ideal of True Womanhood, so delicate and angelic she is almost dead:

> I can see her distinctly as she looked then, in that last year — grave, still, with the curious, unearthly loveliness that comes to pretty women who are underfed — who are slowly starving for bread and meat, for bodily nourishment. She had the look of one dedicated — one ethereal as a saint. (*CSS*, 107)

Lucy's sweetheart, a Yankee who had escaped from a Southern prison and was on his way to the North never to return, stopped at Dare's Gift in order to see her for the last time. While Lucy was hiding him in one

[162] For a thorough analysis of anorexia as an aesthetic icon in the Victorian period, see Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

of the upstairs rooms, two Confederate officers arrived looking for him; if the prisoner escaped, they said, that would mean the fall of Richmond. Lucy, believing her first duty was to her country, revealed her secret to the officers. As Lucy's fiancé was shot dead, Dr. Lakeby, then a young man, noticed the look in his eyes, "a look of mingled surprise, disbelief, terror, and indignation", (*CSS,* 115) just like Harold's look must have been after learning of his wife's betrayal.

According to Dr. Lakeby, then, Mildred is not to blame for her act: she was under the pernicious influence of the house, just as Lucy Dare had been fifty years earlier. By interpreting their actions as driven by supernatural forces, Dr. Lakeby invalidates both women's power to assert their will and voice their experience in their own words. As Branson argues, Mildred and Lucy retreat into the fantastic "because the (male) society in which they live judges their extraordinary actions to be acts of madness prompted by this supernatural environment."[163] Thus, Harold and Dr. Lakeby enact the tragic reversal of the domestic ideal; by pretending to protect Mildred and Lucy, they deprive them of the ownership of their words.[164]

Lucy Dare does not remember the events that had occurred in the house fifty years earlier: her heroic act was forgotten by people, and her attempt to take an active part in the male world of warfare is both silenced and condemned — "She is one of the *mute* inglorious heroines of history . . . But she has always seemed to me diabolical" (*CSS,* 106; emphasis added). The conflict

[163] Branson, "'Experience Illuminated": Veristic Representation in Glasgow's Short Stories', 78.

[164] Tamar Heller mentions this issue in her analysis of Gothic fiction. See *Dead Secrets*, 20.

that underlies the story, as Matthews contends, is that Mildred will not remember anything either, and that she will never know about Lucy's story. Neither of them will ever be able to tell their own stories or know there are others who speak the same language, their words and their actions thus rendered in-valid by patriarchy:

> until the Mildreds of the world are given a voice, the Harolds of the world will never know their stories. Worse yet, perhaps, Glasgow argues, the Mildreds of the world cannot transmit their stories to one another, and are even in danger of not understanding their own.[165]

The obvious doubling of the selves that occurs between Mildred Beckwith and Lucy Dare connects the experience of two women confined to the same domestic space across the boundaries of time. Both Lucy and Mildred have been corseted by social roles and both find betrayal (Lucy her Union fiancé and Mildred her attorney husband) as the only alternative to break the circle of silence and passivity that suffocates them. Although they manage to voice their discontent at their powerlessness, Glasgow seems to remind the reader (and herself) that Mildred's re-enacting of Lucy's disruptive behaviour fifty years later has had identical results. Mildred's exact repetition of Lucy's words and behaviour unites both women in Irigaray's "nightmare of repetition", allowing few alternatives to Mildred. Women's struggle to voice their experience and listen to each other's stories is still hindered by male intervention, although the author leaves a little room for hope: the fact that Mildred and Lucy — and, we can infer, all women — speak the same disruptive language suggests a potential for

[165] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 129.

understanding and a new source of power, a source which Glasgow herself found so problematic and which she was just discovering outside the world of her fiction. As Branson notes, "in their capacity as traitors to love but as loyal servants of other ideals, Lucy and Mildred create themselves . . . Both women live otherwise 'flat' lives, as almost invisible helpmates to the men in their lives; in acting out of character they become heroines and people."[166]

* * *

"The Past" is again set in New York, where Miss Wrenn is hired as a secretary by the lovely Mrs. Vanderbridge, who was "famous on two continents for her beauty" (*CSS*, 119). The main reason why Miss Wrenn is chosen by her is the fact that both women come from Fredericksburg and both studied at a little academy for ladies — presumably not very different from the one Glasgow portrays in *Virginia*, which has already been mentioned in the chapter devoted to this novel. Having had a similar education in their childhood, their two handwritings are almost identical; thus, an emotional identification of Miss Wrenn with her employer is predictable. As she follows the maid to her third storey room, she feels "a bond of sympathy in my thoughts" (*CSS*, 119) even before meeting the lady, which reminds us of the immediate attraction Margaret Randolph felt for Mrs. Maradick. The first picture the reader gets from Mrs. Vanderbridge through the eyes of Miss Wrenn is that of a radiant southern beauty, an "exquisite flower" (*CSS*, 120) of splendid dark red hair and intensely violet

[166] Branson, "'Experience Illuminated": Veristic Representation in Glasgow's Short Stories', 84.

eyes. Looking at her more attentively, though, Miss Wrenn realises that her beautiful eyes are heavy and that her mouth quivers:

> she flung herself on the couch before the fire with a movement that struck me as hopeless. I saw her feet tap the white rug fur, while she plucked nervously at the lace on the end of one of the gold-coloured sofa pillows. For an instant the thought flashed through my mind that she had been taking something – a drug of some sort – and that she was suffering from the effects of it. Then she looked at me steadily, almost as if she were reading my thoughts, and I knew that I was wrong. (*CSS*, 120)

In that first interview, Miss Wrenn is moved by Mrs. Vanderbridge's kindness and, though she dislikes having to dine with her and her husband, resolves to accept as she sees plainly that Mrs. Vanderbridge does not wish to be alone with him. "I'm ready to help you in any way — in any way that I can" (*CSS*, 121), she replies. Mrs. Vanderbridge's connection to her is also immediate; she seems relieved to have found someone she can trust and smiles for the first time — "We shall get on beautifully, I know, because I can talk to you." (*CSS*, 121) When Hopkins, the maid, comes to Miss Wrenn's room to bring her tea, Miss Wrenn is reassured that Mrs. Vanderbridge is in need of a friend in whom she can rely at all times. Through the maid's words, it becomes clear to the reader that Mr. Vanderbridge, though a kind and charming man, is never considered as a potential helper or protector to his wife. Besides, Mrs. Vanderbridge's traditional southern education apparently prevents her from annoying her husband with her problems, since her duty as a wife precisely consists in sacrificing her ego to his. Thus, the support of another female who can be understanding without being patronising is crucial at a moment when a mysterious hazard is menacing and her mental health is at stake:

> [a]nd she needs somebody who can help her. She needs a real friend – somebody who will stand by her no matter what happens . . . You can stand by and watch. You can come between her and harm – if you see it . . . I don't know what it is, but I know it is there. I feel it even when I can't see it.
> (*CSS,* 123)

The immediate bond of affection and understanding between the two women and Mrs. Vanderbridge's weak and feverish condition — accompanied by recurring nervous disorders — are not the only elements that remind us of "The Shadowy Third". The first paragraph in the story, which recalls Miss Wrenn's impressions on entering the Vanderbridge house, already introduces the reader into the mystery of a haunted house which functions as a prison for Miss Wrenn:

> I had no sooner entered the house than I knew something was wrong. Though I had never been in so splendid a place before – it was one of those big houses just off Fifth Avenue – I had a suspicion from the first that the magnificence covered a secret disturbance. I was always quick to receive impressions, and when the black iron doors swung together behind me, I felt as if I were shut inside a prison. (*CSS,* 119)

As happens in "The Shadowy Third", the house represents an inner world of confusion between past and present, alive and dead, real and imaginary. Its inhabitants – including Mr. Vanderbridge — are trapped by the suffocating atmosphere of some invisible horror lurking in the dark, which materialises (if one can call an apparition material) in the ghost of the first Mrs. Vanderbridge, who appears at the dinner table. Seeing that "the Other One", as they call her, is completely ignored by her employers even when she does not take her eyes off Mr. Vanderbridge, Miss Wrenn learns that the ghost of the former Mrs. Vanderbridge appears every time Mr. Vanderbridge thinks of her, out of a sense of guilt for her premature death. Although Mr. Vanderbridge can see her, he thinks that no one else does, while Mrs. Vanderbridge would never consider mentioning the matter to her husband:

> ‘He doesn’t know that she knows.’
> ‘And she won’t tell him?’
> ‘She is the sort that would die first – just the opposite from the Other One – for she leaves him free, she never clutches and strangles. It isn’t her way.’
> (*CSS,* 131)

As days pass, Miss Wrenn observes with despair how her employer gradually loses her strength and has to be dosed with drugs daily — of course Glasgow makes it clear that the physician in question does not have the remotest idea of the malady he is treating, as is the case with many other alienists that appear in her fiction. Mr. Vanderbridge, far from trying to help his wife, becomes more and more lost in his memories.

Again as happens in the previous stories, the most significant confusion occurs between female self and other, which seems to illustrate Glasgow’s own attempts at defining her individual self while relating to other female selves. Although the most obvious doubling is that between Mrs. Vanderbridge and the Other One — they share the same name, the same husband and the same house — the most intense relationship in terms of emotional and psychological identification occurs between Mrs. Vanderbridge and Miss Wrenn. Miss Wrenn comes to find the solution to the mystery almost by accident while she is helping Mrs. Vanderbridge to empty an old desk from one of the upstairs rooms. While filing old letters she learns that it was the first Mrs. Vanderbridge’s desk, and that Mr. Vanderbridge had shut himself in that room for almost a year after his wife’s death. She discovers a pile of love letters tied together, which she assumes had been written by Mr. Vanderbridge to his first wife. After considering showing them to the husband instead of the wife, “some jealous feeling about the phantom” (*CSS*, 136) makes her change her mind and run downstairs with the determination of convincing Mrs. Vanderbridge not to show the letters to him, as she knows “she was capable of rising above her jealousy”. (*CSS*, 136) Her feeling of jealousy — those letters

would make Mr. Vanderbridge think of his first wife more than ever — and her complete certainty of her employer's feelings make the emotional and psychological boundaries between Mrs. Vanderbridge and Miss Wrenn blurred at times.

When Mrs. Vanderbridge reads the letters, she realises the handwriting is not her husband's, and the fact that the letters had been written after the first Mrs. Vanderbridge's marriage make it clear that she had been unfaithful. Miss Wrenn thinks Mrs. Vanderbridge can win back her husband by showing him the letters, but while Mrs. Vanderbridge considers that possibility, her husband enters the room. The ghost of the Other One has been there all the time, and for a minute Mrs. Vanderbridge remains silent and immobile, looking at the letters scattered around her. She finally resolves to confront the ghost and speaks to her directly for the first time: "[a]fter all, you are dead and I am living, and I cannot fight you that way. I give up everything. I give him back to you. Nothing is mine that I cannot win and keep fairly. Nothing is mine that belongs really to you." (*CSS,* 138)

Mrs. Vanderbridge's act of generosity makes the Other One appear not revengeful and evil, but loving and gentle, before she finally disappears. Thus, we infer, the first Mrs. Vanderbridge's haunting of the house was caused by her sense of guilt over her infidelity. As Pamela Matthews acknowledges, "the strength rather than the weakness of the women characters is emphasized, and cooperative rather than competitive relationships among women are privileged."[167] The doubling of the selves between Mrs. Vanderbridge and Miss Wrenn, she poses, is not conceived as a battle between one self and a threatening other but "as a mirroring of

[167] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 121.

similarity rather than difference."[168] The second doubling of the present Mrs. Vanderbridge, the threatening Other One, is represented by another woman, the former Mrs. Vanderbridge. Her ghostly haunting of the house and her illicit sexual relationship seem to voice the disruptive force of women who rebel against their properly passionless role within the domestic. Such women are victimised, Tamar Heller argues, because of their unruly sexual desires and the deviation from their proper functions.[169] The dangers and the tragedies of married life suggest a projection of the second Mrs. Vanderbridge's fears into the figure of an uncanny Other, much in the fashion of Jane Eyre's disruptive double, Bertha Mason.

According to Matthews, the first Mrs. Vanderbridge represents Glasgow's awareness that some relationships among women become destructive, especially when they accept a self shaped by male definitions of women, since they entail competition, jealousy, and existence only in relation to men. Mrs. Vanderbridge's decision to burn the letters and verbally confront the ghost, Matthews further suggests, anticipates feminist theories that speculate about the need to find new words to define experience, as language itself is mediated by patriarchal oppression. I believe Glasgow emphasises the strength of this final act, which protects the first Mrs. Vanderbridge instead of attacking her, and gives new meaning to the traditionally feminine qualities which give the second Mrs. Vanderbridge the triumph "not by resisting, but by accepting; not by violence, but by gentleness; not by grasping, but by renouncing." (*CSS,* 139) Mr. Vanderbridge's incorrect apprehension of the supernatural events in the

[168] Ibid., 132.
[169] Heller, *Dead Secrets*, 21-22.

house would have led its inhabitants to suffer indefinitely, and it would have probably caused madness or even death to the second Mrs. Vanderbridge. Again, Glasgow suggests, it takes a community of women to understand and re-write (or un-write) the first Mrs. Vanderbridge's sad story. The successful exorcism of the ghost is achieved through intuition and cooperation between women (living and dead), who, as Branson asserts, "find a way to resolve the mystery/misery that haunts the house."[170]

* * *

In "**Whispering Leaves"**, Glasgow continues to search for her past and recovers her connections with the female world of her foremothers, a world towards which she had since maintained an ambiguous relationship. The story is narrated by an unnamed young woman, a Northerner who is invited by some distant cousins to spend a holiday in Virginia in order to become acquainted with the house where her mother and grandmother had been born. Her emotional connections to what Matthews calls "woman's traditions" are crucial to the development of the story, a daughter's search for her lost mother/s:[171]

> [t]hough I was never in Virginia before, I had been brought up on the traditions of my mother's old home on the Rappahannock . . . When I descended from the train into the green and gold of the afternoon, I felt almost as if I were stepping back into some old summer . . . [A]s soon as my foot touched the ground I was

[170] Branson, "'Experience Illuminated": Veristic Representation in Glasgow's Short Stories', 84.

[171] Heller comments on this aspect in *Dead Secrets*, 18.

> greeted affectionately by the coloured driver, who still called my mother "Miss Effie." (*CSS*, 140)

The identification of the protagonist with the home of her foremothers, and the fact that the black coachman instantly recognises her as the daughter of "Miss Effie", returns to the already-mentioned Gothic doubling of the selves and the importance of relationships between women, which Glasgow repeatedly explores in her short fiction. Using the protagonist of "Whispering Leaves" as a mirror to her own experience, Glasgow brings back the memories of her childhood world to recover a more extensive network of female connections which not only include her biological mother but also her black mammy Lizzie Jones. Apart from the obvious doubling between the protagonist and her mother, the narrator discovers an unknown world of affectionate relationships which encompass different generations of women and which trespass the boundaries of kinship, race and social class and which Tamar Heller includes in her definition of the female Gothic. [172]

As she learns from the black coachman and later from a white driver who takes her to the house, her mother's distant cousin Pelham Blanton and his second wife Hannah live in Whispering Leaves with their five children (two pairs of twins of small age and a year-old baby) and Pell, the seven-year-old son Mr. Blanton had with his first wife, Clarissa. Before Clarissa died shortly after childbirth, she asked Mammy Rhody, who had been her own mammy, to take care of the baby. It seems Mammy Rhody had kept her promise while she lived and continued to do so after death, though Pell and

[172] Ibid., 27.

the young protagonist are the only ones to see her. Pell insists that Mammy Rhody is not dead — in fact, he is always seen out of doors talking to someone who is invisible to everybody. Moreover, the massive presence of birds singing at all times and out of season is a reminder of the birds Mammy Rhody used to tame for Pell, and that has frightened all the black servants away from Whispering Leaves. After dusk, only white servants stay near the house, as blacks have perceived a supernatural presence that the Blantons completely ignore.

While Hannah's children look healthy and robust, Pell is a little boy of delicate features towards whom our young protagonist is immediately attracted. Although she had never seen Pell before and, as far as the story tells us, she is unmarried and childless, the protagonist instantly develops a mysterious bond of affection with the "elfin" child (*CSS,* 144) that is very close to the maternal instinct:

> [h]e was a queer child, I thought as I gazed at him, ugly and pinched, and yet with a charm which I felt from the first moment my eyes fell on him. There was a defiant shyness in his manner, and his little face, under the flaming curls, was too thin and pale for healthy childhood. But, in spite of his strangeness, I had never in my life been so strongly attracted, so completely drawn, to a child. (*CSS*, 144-145)

In "The Shadowy Third", the nurse Margaret Randolph develops a similar instinct towards Dorothea, the "goblin child", and in many ways acts as her surrogate mother after Mrs. Maradick's confinement and death. Apart from Margaret, only the black butler Gabriel is able to see the girl, presumably because he was brought from South Carolina by Mrs. Maradick's mother and thus is somehow connected to the matrilineal. Similarly, the narrator is the only one able to see Mammy Rhody, as both

women come to share the common duty of acting as surrogate mothers of little Pell in his mother's absence. Ellen Glasgow's choice to name her character Mammy Rhody brings us back to her childhood and to the world of female traditions she was attempting to reconcile through her fiction. Rhoda Kibble, "Mammy Rhoda", as Glasgow recalls in her autobiography, had been Anne Gholson's mammy after her mother's premature death, and had even nursed some of Anne's children. After Rhoda Kibble's death, Anne Gholson found a new helpmeet in Lizzie Jones, who nursed Glasgow in her early childhood and to whose memory this story also pays tribute.

The young woman's immediate attraction to Pell and the consequent identification with Mammy Rhody this relationship implies establish a third doubling of the main character with Pell's dead mother Clarissa. The symbolic language of flowers, which Glasgow seemed to know well, is used in the story to evidence the tension between Clarissa's sensibility and the Blanton's complete lack of it. Of course Glasgow makes it clear the narrator takes sides with Clarissa, as if the scent of the flowers had infused some secret knowledge into her, a sensibility that Pell has clearly inherited but which the Blantons are unable to perceive. Narcissus, related to the word "narcotic" through its Latin root, symbolises the sleep of death, a death that could be only a dream, which blurs the boundaries between reality and imagination, alive and dead, bringing together the two worlds. Incidentally, Mrs. Maradick's favourite flowers in "The Shadowy Third" were daffodils, in Latin *narcissus*:

> That's narcissus. It's in full bloom now . . . The first Mrs. Blanton planted the whole garden in those flowers, and we have never got rid of them.
> (*CSS*: 149)
>
> 'The garden? Oh, yes, we've had to let that go. It was kept up as long as Clarissa lived. She had a passion for flowers . . . Nobody sets foot on it except Pell, and he oughtn't to go there.' . . .
> 'Perhaps that's part of the charm,' I responded. 'It expresses itself, not some human being's idea of planting.'
> She looked at me as if she did not know what I meant, and on my other side Cousin Pelham chuckled softly. 'That sounds like Clarissa,' he said, and there was no trace of sadness in his voice. (*CSS*, 153)

Hannah, who had been in charge of the housekeeping since Clarissa's death, became Mrs. Blanton in less than a year, but her position in the house did not change much. Glasgow clearly refuses the Victorian notion of marriage and motherhood Hannah adheres to, as there are almost no differences between the roles of wife and servant. If women keep being coaxed into believing that self-sacrifice for the comfort of husband and children must be enough to achieve fulfilment, as Matthews posits, they will "see themselves as nothing more than keepers of household order and peace."[173] Hannah, though she is literally a wife and a mother, limits her functions to providing meals for her husband and maintaining discipline among the children, so she is in effect very far from the role of loving wife and mother that she should ideally fulfil. While Clarissa is literally dead, Hannah's individuality has been smothered by her household duties, and her personality invalidated by a domestic ideal which is everything but blissful. Without having met Clarissa, the protagonist identifies with her plight and intuitively imagines how she must have felt as Mrs. Blanton, a role which

[173] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 142.

she refuses, one can assume, in favour of the alternative form of nurturing motherhood that Clarissa and Mammy Rhody offer:

> Evidently, I decided, the second Mrs. Blanton was the right wife for him. Vain, spoiled, selfish, amiable as long as he was given everything that he wanted . . . I wondered how that first wife, Clarissa of the romantic name and the flaming hair, had endured existence in this lonely neighbourhood with the companionship of a man who thought of nothing but food and drink. (*CSS*, 152-153)

Though the spirit of Mammy Rhody never speaks to the protagonist, silence acts in this story as a positive medium of communication, as "some unrecognizable language they use with each other", as Matthews remarks,[174] which is akin to the disruptive language used by the protagonists of other stories by Glasgow and anticipates a notion of what the French feminists would call *écriture féminine*[175]. Just as the narrator learns about her mother's roots through some unspoken identification with a house she never inhabited, and just as Clarissa communicates with her through their shared love of birds, trees and flowers,[176] Mammy Rhody manages to transmit her message of nurturing motherhood "in some inaudible language which I did not yet understand." (*CSS,* 150) As Matthews puts it, a complex network of intuitive female affiliations is formed around Pell to help the protagonist

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[174] Ibid., 139.

[175] French feminist theoreticians — such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva among others — have envisioned different ways of opposing patriarchal repression of women's experience by way of deconstructing masculinist discourse and creating new forms of expression that challenge cultural phallocentrism. See Anne Rosalind Jones, 'Writing the Body. Toward an Understanding of *l'Écriture Féminine*', in Elaine Showalter, ed., *The New Feminist Criticism. Essays on Women, Literature and Theory* (London: Virago Press, 1985) 361-377.

[176] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions,* 139. As Matthews points out, Richard K. Meeker's complaints about Glasgow's use of these symbols ignore the importance of nature in the connections between the women characters: "The only serious flaw in "Whispering Leaves" is the excessive symbolism of birds, trees, and flowers; there is enough horticultural detail to fill a gardening magazine. Further pruning would have helped". See the editorial note to "Whispering Leaves", 164. I would encourage readers to (re)read the story and judge for themselves.

find a maternal role which goes beyond the Victorian notion of domesticity Hannah Blanton represents, that is, "beyond the literal definitions of marriage and motherhood" and towards a new concept of female nurturance that reconciles dependence on others without loss of independence or identity.[177] Thus, as Anne Williams poses, the female Gothic rewrites patriarchal assumptions and offers a more human version of a self-gendered female as an alternative to the conventional familial structure.[178]

After the fire that destroys the house — and symbolically destroys that ideal of motherhood-as-self-effacement — Mammy Rhody leaves Pell in the narrator's hands, thus passing her the responsibility of the child's care and transmitting a heritage of love and understanding without loss of selfhood that passes between women across races and across time. As Matthews concludes,

> [t]he lessons that the past will teach her . . . define her place in a matrifocal herstory of nurturing and female connection that, she learns, exists separate from marriage and actual childbearing. She discovers at the home of her mothers and grandmothers that literal wifehood and motherhood are unnecessary for a life of nurturing affiliation that can also incorporate independence and self-determination.[179]

* * *

"Jordan's End" is perhaps the most sombre of Glasgow's Gothic stories. As in "Dare's Gift", the author chooses a male, a young unnamed doctor, as the imperfect narrator of a story that actually belongs to a woman. The story is named after the house and its owner, thus reinforcing the sense of female entrapment within the house, both as a space and as a symbol of patriarchal

[177] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 142.
[178] Williams, *Art of Darkness*, 138.
[179] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 137.

order. The story begins when the country doctor gets lost on his way to Jordan's End. Judith Yardly Jordan, the young wife of Alan Jordan, has sent for him after her husband has had a crisis during the night. By giving a lift to old Father Peterkin, the doctor learns the story of intermarriage and inherited insanity that has cursed the Jordan family for generations. Again by means of a male narrator, the reader gets bits and pieces of the story of Judith, who married Alan Jordan after a short courtship and knew nothing about the family history. Apparently, Alan was the first of the Jordan men who had chosen a wife outside the family. After some years of marriage and the birth of a son, Benjamin, Alan started to show signs of the illness that had afflicted his father, his uncles, and his grandfather, all of whom had been sent to lunatic asylums. Judith was suddenly trapped in a nightmare of insanity and poverty, with no male relative left who could — or, ideally, should — provide for the house, three old ladies who needed her care, and a nine-year-old boy who, unfortunately, is "the very spit an' image of his pa". (*CSS*, 205) The bleak future that awaits Judith can be predicted from the images of decay and death that pervade the first scene in the story and the path the doctor follows on his way to Jordan's End:

> [a]t the fork of the road there was the dead tree where buzzards were roosting, and through its boughs I saw the last flare of the sunset. On either side the November woods were flung in broken masses against the sky. (*CSS*, 203)

The house, as it is the case with the stories we have analysed so far, functions as a metaphor of patrilineal heritage. Jordan's End, like Poe's House of Usher, bears the curse of insanity and decay and imprisons its inhabitants, which again places Glasgow within the tradition of the female

Gothic. Unlike the other four, this story has no supernatural elements and, for once, the seeds of mental derangement are transmitted through the male line. The story again echoes Mary Wollstonecraft fiction in which, as Tamar Heller argues, the nightmarish realities of the home are more terrifying than ghosts.[180] In spite of its variations, as Matthews brilliantly argues in her discussion of "Jordan's End", Judith's entrapment in her husband's house acts as a reminder of women's entrapment in patriarchal traditions, in a name and a family they must assume as their own, and in a situation they did not create but they nevertheless have to cope with.[181]

While Alan sits in his room brooding and hopelessly "plaiting and unplaiting the fringe of a plaid shawl" (*CSS*, 211) as his father did for twenty years, the three old women perform the same manual activity, not as a meaningless repetition of insanity but as a productive form of needlework:

> at the foot of the spiral staircase, of a scantily furnished room, where three lean black-robed figures, as impassive as the Fates, were grouped in front of a wood fire. They were doing something with their hands. Knitting, crocheting, or plaiting straw? (*CSS*, 210)

The doctor's comparison of the old women with the Fates is not casual. Their knitting, as we will see, becomes a metaphor of their understanding of the cycles of life and death.

After he briefly examines Alan and prescribes an opiate, the narrator talks about the Jordans to Dr. Carstairs, "the leading alienist in the country", (*CSS*, 208) although the famous psychiatrist quickly dismisses him and he is left "none the wiser because of the great reputation of Carstairs." (*CSS*, 212)

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[180] Heller, *Dead Secrets*, 26.
[181] Matthews, *Woman's Traditions*, 144-151.

Like the narrator, Carstairs pities Judith's situation but fails to understand her plight and (what is worse) praises her inescapable self-destruction as heroic. Here Glasgow fictionalises again her distrust of psychiatrists and doctors in general as proper listeners and interpreters of women's stories.

Two days after his first visit, Judith sends for the doctor again. When he arrives at Jordan's End, the narrator finds Alan Jordan dead in his room and the medicine bottle empty. It seems that only Judith has been alone with Alan, so the doctor assumes that she administered him an overdose of the medicine. The three old women, one of whom is crocheting an infant's sacque of pink wool, and an old black woman who croons some unintelligible tune surround Alan's bed. The traditionally feminine domestic duty of mourning the dead and making baby's clothes are, Matthews suggests, suddenly transformed in a metaphor of women's frightening power over life and death.[182] Even while confronting that horrible scene and overwhelmed by Judith's sudden act of power, the doctor cannot help idealising Judith's pathos:

> [a]gainst the gray sky and the black intersecting branches of the cedar, her head, with its austere perfection, was surrounded by that visionary air of legend. So Antigone might have looked on the day of her sacrifice, I reflected. I had never seen a creature who appeared so withdrawn, so detached, from all human associations. (*CSS*, 214)

Judith Jordan's appearance, that of a wasted beauty worn out by poverty and suffering, is described by the young doctor according to the Victorian parameters of the self-effacing wife who parades her starved body as the ultimate sacrifice of the womanly woman to the demands of her

[182] Ibid., 146.

family. Although he pities her, the doctor cannot help to romanticise her looks and idealise her emaciation as a symbol of sublime, almost saintly, feminine purity:

> I have been in many countries since then, and looked on many women; but her face, with a wan light on it, is the last one I shall forget in my life. Beauty! Why, that woman will be beautiful when she is a skeleton, was the thought that flashed into my mind.
> She was very tall, and so thin that her flesh seemed faintly luminous, as if an inward light pierced the transparent substance. It was the beauty, not of earth, but of triumphant spirit. Perfection, I suppose, is the rarest thing we achieve in this world of incessant compromise with inferior forms; yet the woman who stood there in that ruined place appeared to me to have stepped straight out of a legend or allegory. (*CSS*, 207)

As Matthews notes, the doctor-narrator's view of Judith as an ethereal and powerless "angel in the house" responds to the male desire to "kill" women into a both denigrated and idealised image of perfection which is more manageable and less threatening to them. The fact that this frail, helpless, almost dead creature is pictured as strangely desirable (the more vulnerable she looks, I assume, the more powerful he believes himself to be) reveals an almost necrophiliac desire that is especially disturbing to the female reader. The narrator's definition of Judith as "a dead icon of perfection", Matthews argues, transforms her into "Woman as Idea, not *a* woman".[183] The real Judith who kills her husband in an act of mercy is thus regarded as less dangerous, while her attempt at independence and self-assertion is ultimately invalidated:

> Her white face did not become more pallid as the light struck it; her tragic eyes did not grow deeper; her frail figure under the shawl did not shiver in the raw rain. She felt nothing; I realized

[183] Ibid., 147-148.

> suddenly . . . Could she have killed him? Had that delicate creature nerved her will to the unspeakable act? It was incredible. It was inconceivable. (*CSS*, 214-215)

Judith's loyalty to her husband — she had promised to help him die if his disease proved hopeless — gives her the power that becomes so frightening to the narrator but, ironically, does not liberate her from the suffocating imprisonment of the house. Although she tells the doctor she will go away from Jordan's End and find work elsewhere, she is aware the three old ladies cannot be left alone, and her nine-year-old son is likely to develop her husband's insanity. According to Matthews, she cannot escape the domestic; her life is almost hopelessly "woven into the lives of the Jordans as tightly as the wool of the shawl she does not bother to pick up."[184] Through this dark and bitter story, Glasgow voices the silent pain of countless women whose physical and mental autonomy was crippled by their entrapment in domesticity.

* * *

Pamela Matthews contends that Glasgow did not fully take advantage of the subversive possibilities the tradition of the female Gothic offered: in all her stories, the protagonists are left alone without the women who made their rebellion possible. Indeed, Margaret Randolph, Mildred Beckwith and the unnamed protagonist of "Whispering Leaves" lose their companions through either natural or supernatural causes: Mrs. Maradick, Lucy Dare and

[184] Ibid., 215.

Mammy Rhody. Mrs. Vanderbridge and Miss Wrenn presumably stay together, but the former will surely devote more time to her husband; Judith Jordan and the three old women also continue together, although this relationship ultimately dooms Judith to enforced domesticity. Although, as Matthews poses, "the stories often emphasize the difficulties in restoring female subjectivity rather than the empowering possibilities realized, for a time, within them"[185], I believe Glasgow succeeded in asserting her point of view through her Gothic stories. Her suspicion of romance and marriage and her commitment to female friends is translated in her tales into a sense of female companionship that — at least, potentially — can break the debilitating effects of domesticity and dependence. The process of neuromimesis[186] that Glasgow describes in the five stories is endowed with suggestive supernatural qualities and appears as a powerful symbol of this potential, often contrasting with the more objective (and erroneous) male version of the events.

In spite of the limited hopes the endings seem to offer the female characters, her (re)discovery of women's traditions uncircumscribed by male standards anticipates unlimited possibilities for female emancipation. As Branson notes, Glasgow's Gothic stories can be viewed as feminist fictions, since they emphasise women's collective and intuitive efforts to overcome male attempts at invalidating their words and actions:

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[185] Ibid., 150-151.

[186] See Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions*, 16. Athena Vrettos defines neuromimesis as the female carer's identification with her patient, a "sympathetic form of spectatorship" and a "feminized form of viewing", which contrasts with the more "objective" and detached vision of the male physician towards the female object of his observations.

> [s]trong women struggle cooperatively against the male-defined society in which they live. They are aided in this struggle by supernatural agents — ghosts and living houses — that balance the perhaps cruel and rational forces that are attempting to limit or even end their lives.[187]

[187] Branson, "'Experience Illuminated": Veristic Representation in Glasgow's Short Stories', 83.