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“Sheltered Existence” as a Way to Self-Discovery in the Life and Fiction of Ellen Glasgow

If only women had been satisfied to remain protected, how much pleasanter the world, even the changing modern world, might be today! If only they had been satisfied to wait in patience, not to seek after happiness!... There could be nothing nobler in women than the beauty of long waiting and wifely forbearance...

Ellen Glasgow, *They Stooped to Folly: A Comedy of Morals*

Despite the difficulties inherent in their situation, women writers of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South sought their own voice to create an alternative, gender-specific vision of the region. For women, writing meant alienation from mainstream patriarchal culture. Therefore they developed a sense of what they could not be and gained awareness of how the past had “jilted” their mothers and grandmothers. As Louise Westling points out, this was the first step to self-discovery (36, 37), a personal process inextricably intertwined with the acknowledgment of the women’s common plight. The present article traces this process in the fictional and autobiographical writings of Ellen Glasgow.

Starting her literary career before World War I, Glasgow could be perceived as a forerunner of the Southern Renaissance and modernism. As Amy Thompson McCandless points out, Ellen Glasgow was “a transitional figure between the romanticization of the postbellum novel and the realism of modern southern fiction” (146). Glasgow’s literary intention was to provide a realistic portrayal of the South as a counter-reaction to the fiction that eulogized the antebellum South and transformed it into the mythical paradise lost. Questioning the cult of Southern womanhood, with its distribution of conventional gender roles, Glasgow can be counted among the precursors of the feminist tradition in Southern literature. Moreover, her depiction of the modernizing South reflects the tensions that were present in the early twentieth-century Southern consciousness, thus making Glasgow an insightful observer of social change.

“Born without a skin” (*The Woman Within* 5), as she was called by her African American mammy, Ellen Glasgow was early marked for extraordinary sensitivity and introspective nature. A daughter of Francis Glasgow, a stern Presbyterian ironworks executive,

who gave his wife and children all the things they needed but love (15), and Anne Gholson, a Southern belle, a flower of the old Tidewater, who “would divide her last crust with a suffering stranger” (14), young Ellen felt torn within and homeless in the hostile world of opposing forces. Living in apparently cosy, affluent and comfortable conditions, Ellen Glasgow seemed to have been brought up in a “shelter,” which she understood as the whole civilization man has built to protect himself from reality. In the course of her life and career as a writer she fought against paternalism, which sustained Southern myths and conventions, sanctimony and hypocrisy of Southern religiousness or “evasive idealism,” so popular in the regional writing of the nineteenth-century South.

Glasgow’s first moment of self-discovery came in her infancy: on one occasion, when lying comfortably in a cradle, she was visited by a terrifying apparition – a vacant, malevolent face without a body. As she admits, in that moment she became aware of herself as well as of the universe apart from herself. Glasgow writes that since the age of eight she was “driven to unchildlike brooding over [her] sense of exile in a hostile world” (25). Her self-encapsulation in an apparently sheltered life was exacerbated by the pain caused by the partings with or deaths of her closest persons.

Her mammy’s unexpected departure, her mother’s sickness and her sister’s death, all had devastating effects on Glasgow’s frail nature. As a form of self-defence, Ellen developed a tendency to go “deeper and deeper into [herself]” and spun “the protective cocoon of indifference,” having realised that “an artificial brightness is the safest defence against life” (67). However, this brightness did not have to be artificial. When Glasgow suddenly fell in love with Gerald B.¹, a married man, her gloomy view of life greatly changed. As she recalls, the affection began as a sudden illumination and for seven years left her in “an arrested pause between dreaming and waking” (160). She felt suspended in “eternity” and experienced, even if relatively late in life, the “illusion of its own immortality” that the first love created (160).

The affection marked an important stage in Glasgow’s process of self-discovery: “The great discovery that my own identity, that I, myself, could triumph over brute circumstances, had destroyed and then re-created the entire inner world of my consciousness” (160). As she further admits: “this passionate awakening to life had restored my lost faith in myself” (157). Love virtually isolated her from the outside world and incited an inward force that made her look under the surface of things and lead a “secret life.”

¹ The real identity of Gerald B. is debatable. Speculations based on Ellen Glasgow’s correspondence point at several names, including Walter Hines Page, Pearce Bailey, a New York doctor, Holbrook Curtis, another doctor, Hewitt Hanson Howland, an advisory editor at Bobbs-Merrill, and William Riggan Travers. Some critics even claim that his existence was pure fiction and it was the meaning of the relationship that counted more for the author’s artistic creation and inspiration than the real presence of the man in Glasgow’s life (Goodman 79, 83).

After seven years, however, the force that had emotionally elevated the artist pushed her into the abyss of despair. Gerald's sudden illness and imminent death triggered off yet another mystic experience. While lying in the grass, Glasgow felt the Divine unity with nature, an illumination and "ecstasy" just like mystics, who "had attained Divine consciousness through a surrender of the agonized self. By giving up, by yielding the sense of separateness, by extinguishing the innermost core of identity." Having found the communion with the Absolute, "or with Absolute nothingness," Glasgow was strengthened in the belief that she should seek for God in her own soul (165).

The striving for inwardness marks Glasgow's literary works. Early in her life, she discovered her true vocation, which led her to "some hidden forest of wonder and delight... to that strange exile to which all writers who are born and not made are condemned" (37). After her poems had been found and read aloud by her sister, she felt embarrassed and humiliated, and decided to write only in secret. After this incident she "began to live two lives twisted together." One was the "external life" and the other her "interior world... thickly woven of recollections." She felt "immersed in some dark stream of identity, stronger and deeper than the external movement of living" (40-41), and believed that she should be faithful to her "inner vision" (125). Consequently, she employed a mode of self-expression which, according to Helen Fiddymont Levy, evokes a "communal, ritualistic language, one she calls the 'speech of heart'" (54).

Virginia and *Barren Ground* are Glasgow's two novels with autobiographical strands, which show contrasting sides of the writer's personality. The title character of *Virginia* is a docile, innocent girl; a daughter of the descendants of prominent antebellum families who lost their fortune after the Civil War. Despite poor conditions, Virginia's family lives in the idealized world of aristocratic pre-war memories, where the quiet martyrdom in the name of faded glory and dignity is the price to be paid for evading truth about the changing South. Brought up in accordance with the patriarchal rule that "the less a girl knew about life, the better prepared she would be to contend with it" (22), Virginia Pendleton lacks an inquiring mind and deeply believes that a girl's ultimate goal is marriage. Thus when she falls in love with and then marries an aspiring playwright Oliver Treadwell, she is in a state of bliss.

An obedient wife and devoted mother of three children, Virginia submissively invests her entire energy in family and housework. But her husband does not see a "mental companion" in her. Virginia does not even notice that with time her husband's feelings for her dry out and that her love and sacrifice do not suffice to save the marriage. She seems to be unaware of the simple truth so aptly expressed by Mary Wollstonecraft in "A Vindication of the Rights of Women": "the woman who has only been taught to please will soon find that her charms are oblique sunbeams, and that they cannot have

much effect on her husband's heart when they are seen every day, when the summer is passed and gone" (593).

As Virginia is far from being a coquettish type, she believes that the power of devotion and wifely servility is the basis of a successful relationship and can win the heart of each man. Despite the signs of crisis in their marriage, Virginia pretends not to see her husband's vices. Her idealized world is bound to fall into pieces, which happens when Oliver finds refuge from the suffocating love of his wife in the arms of a glamorous Broadway actress. Virginia goes to New York, hoping that he will atone, but by the door of his hotel room she gives up; she comes back home alone with a resolution to commit suicide. Her only consolation is a letter from her son, Henry, with a message of his homecoming.

Virginia Pendleton, presumably modelled on Ellen Glasgow's mother, seems to live in a sheltered world, built on obsolete, antebellum values. Born into the reality "white-washed" by her parents, young Virginia naturally tends to "evade unromantic reality" and perceive things in the way she wants them to appear. She completely depends on others, that is men; like her own mother, she has been taught to "endure martyrdom in support of the doctrine of inferiority to men" (200). Inevitably, Virginia shares the fate of passive and submissive Southern women, who are doomed to social insignificance and existential uncertainty. As she admits in a moment of illumination:

Was that a woman's life, after all? Never to be able to go out and fight for what one wanted! Always to sit at home and wait, without moving a foot or lifting a hand toward happiness! Never to dare gallantly! Never even to suffer openly! Always to will in secret, always to hope in secret, always to triumph or to fail in secret. Never to be one's self – never to let one's soul or body relax from the attitude of expectancy into the attitude of achievement. For the first time, born of the mutinous longing in her heart, there came to her the tragic vision of life. (152-153)

Virginia believes that "a real woman should be the embodiment of love and docility" (218), therefore she hides her suffering, jealousy, pain of unreciprocated love deep behind the manifestations of endurance and obedience. Defenceless and helpless as she seems to be, Virginia follows the guidance of strict moral values so deeply ingrained in her mind. Her spiritual experience is rooted in the faith in God and the feeling of communion with other women. The time of fighting with the disease of her beloved son, Henry, turns out to be crucial for Virginia's reconciliation with her own feminine self. In the beginning, she is first overwhelmed by the motherly fears and the sense of isolation. As an offering for Henry's health, "she [lays] her youth on the altar of the Power of

mercy.” For three subsequent days of frenzied prayers, Virginia feels as if she “had lived and died many times” and that “immensity of inner space separated her even from Oliver.” She finally realizes “that one is always alone when one despairs, that there is a secret chamber in every soul where neither love nor sympathy can follow one.” The time of test allows her to discover her own identity as a mother in a world where “love and suffering are inseparable” (358).

Barren Ground, Glasgow’s most overtly autobiographical novel, contrasts starkly with *Virginia* as far as the portrayal of the heroine is concerned. Unlike Virginia, who could boast of her antebellum aristocratic ancestry, Dorinda Oakley, born into a “land poor” farming family in Virginia, feels entrapped in the sordid existence of her parents, for whom only religion and hard work matter. She belongs to a class of “good people,” who “have preserved nothing except themselves” (5), and witnesses the vain struggles of her parents to cultivate the infertile soil with primitive farming methods. As Dorinda lacks Virginia’s belief in inherited antebellum ideas, she refuses to accept the helpless existence. She hopes to escape solitude and to change her depressing situation, when she falls in love with Jason Greylock, an impressionable young doctor. Engaged to be married and already pregnant, Dorinda finds out that her fiancé has just married another woman, apparently under pressure from his family.

Despite this blow Dorinda does not give up, owing all her courage and persistence to the inherited “vein of iron”: she sets off for New York to run away from gossip and start a new life. Conveniently enough, she suffers a miscarriage and spends the next few years with a befriended family. She finally returns to her home town with a strong intention to turn the declining homestead into a prosperous business. In the meantime, Jason’s marriage with Geneva Ellgood falls apart, ending up with the former’s alcoholism and the latter’s suicide. Dorinda’s strong will and fortitude allow her to conquer the eponymous “barren ground” and to establish a successful dairy farm. Despite success and esteem, she does not feel truly happy because the repressed feelings and memories continue to haunt her. Nevertheless, the land is a source of hope for her and a compensation for personal disappointments.

Having written the novel after personal turbulences connected with the broken relationship with Henry Anderson, known from her autobiography as Harold S—, and her suicidal attempt, Glasgow wrote in *The Woman Within* that the novel was “torn out” of her, and tellingly added: “I wrote *Barren Ground*, and immediately I knew I had found myself” (243). The self-discovery experienced by both the heroine and the writer comes from to ability to control instincts and emotions. Whereas Dorinda constantly repeats that she is “through with soft things” (309), that is female affections and obligations, Ellen Glasgow discovers that she was unfit for marriage and that “falling out of love

could be blissful tranquillity” (244). According to Daniel Singal, Virginia retrieves her buried instinctual life from entombment beneath “the dead leaves of civilization,” while Dorinda follows the opposite direction and suppresses the same biological instincts for good (105), even if she cannot banish them from her dreams.

Having renounced love and motherhood, Dorinda may appear to be “barren,” just like the land that she tills used to be. Accordingly, she projects her femininity onto the earth. Her hidden craving to “bring fertility to her inner life is projected outward as a drive to bring fertility to the exterior world” (Huffman 97). To fill in the inner void, she elicits in herself the features of “fortitude” and “endurance.” Susan Goodman points out that “Dorinda creates an interior space that is remote, inviolate, and self-sufficient; nothing disturbs it” (83). As Glasgow puts it in her novel *Vein of iron*: “Not joy, not pain, not love, not passion, not sorrow, not loss, not life at its sharpest edge” (111). It is the land that finally helps Dorinda to recover her identity. She feels that “the spirit of the land was flowing into her, and her own spirit, strengthened and refreshed, was flowing out again toward life. This was the permanent self, she knew” (524). Full of hope and interior harmony, Dorinda looks ahead to what the future holds.

The present analysis of the three works by Ellen Glasgow suggests two conceptions of the female self-discovery. The heroines of *Virginia* and *Barren Ground*, seemingly sheltered by the patriarchal dominance and Southern conventions, undoubtedly would subscribe to Glasgow’s recurrent question: “How can an oversensitive nature defend itself against the malice of life?”

Virginia Pendleton chooses to encapsulate herself in the “martyred sainthood” of the Southern lady, which, according to Richard Gray, albeit defined by passivity, quiet suffering, and mute forbearance, can be seen as positively heroic (74-75). She finds her own identity in the feminine instincts, particularly in the experience of motherhood. Thus, the direction of her search is from “without” to “within.” However, the price Virginia pays for defending her values is loneliness and separation not only from her husband, but also from her children for whom she sacrificed herself.

Glasgow’s rejection of Virginia’s model for self-realization gives way to that of Dorinda, who finds feminine liberation in work. Similarly to Dorinda, who abandons the wasted, romantic, evasive model of Mrs Oakley and creates her own “vein of iron,” Glasgow, in Gray’s words, identifies herself with “the stern, active, unbending figure of the father” instead of the “pliant, passive, yielding figure of the mother” (88). Glasgow and her alter ego, Dorinda, try to escape their instinctual nature, to move from “within” to “without,” and inevitably face the troubling question, verbalized by Mary C. Anderson: “How is the female hero to define her own progress into self-consciousness and self-determination without alienating herself from her biology?” (385). According to

Helen Fiddymment Levy, the answer for both Dorinda and Glasgow is to get free from the anxiety of patriarchal influence through the denial of the “feminine” experience as defined by all the rationalizations of the bodily and the emotional in the dominant discourse (108). Writing for Glasgow and farm-work for Dorinda become the way to break through “impenetrable wall” of the haunting past. Yet, like Virginia, they pay the price of loneliness and isolation. The sheltered existence of Southern middle-class turns out to be a burden, not a relief, for sensitive women. But, as Eudora Welty writes in her autobiographical sketch “One Writer’s Beginnings”: “a sheltered life can be a daring life as well. For all serious daring starts from within” (948).

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