The Realism of Ellen Glasgow

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THE REALISM OF ELLEN GLASGOW

by

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON ELLEN GLASGOW

Ellen Gholson Glasgow, whose work is the subject of this paper, was born April 22, 1874, in Richmond, Virginia. Her parents, Francis Thomas Glasgow and Anne Gholson Glasgow, were both members of well-to-do Virginia families of some distinction socially. They were able to provide Miss Glasgow with a background of culture and an entree into the best Richmond families which furnished her with material for her novels. Their home at Number 1 West Main Street was in the most aristocratic section of the city in 1900; and after industry moved in and characteristically destroyed the quiet beauty of the neighborhood, Ellen Glasgow maintained her family home as an oasis of the old Southern ways in the midst of the new ugliness. There she lived, wrote most of her books, and entertained her literary and family friends until her death, November 22, 1945.

Prevented by ill health from attending a young ladies' seminary, as was customary, Ellen Glasgow was educated by tutors who encouraged her wide reading. Her early interest in social questions was given some formal discipline when, at the age of sixteen, she studied economics privately under the tutelage of a friend who was a professor at the University of Richmond. Since women were not admitted officially to the university at this time, her achievement in winning a Phi Beta Kappa Key, as the first woman to do so at Virginia, is remarkable. Except for this brief interlude, Miss Glasgow's education was the result of her reading.
She began writing novels when she was eighteen years old, a practice in which she was encouraged by her mother. Her first book, *The Descendant*, was published in 1897; thence followed a career of almost half a century in which appeared from her pen nineteen novels, a small collection of verse, and several short stories. Her writing is distinguished by a progressive development and ripening in book after book, and it earned for her in some quarters the title of First Lady of American Fiction. According to an anecdote current in the early 1930's, a group of writers fell to discussing literature. Someone raised the question as to why so few American writers were able to keep their literary powers undiminished beyond middle age. Sinclair Lewis, when asked for his views, is reported to have said only one author then writing showed a continued progress in literary power with each succeeding book, Ellen Glasgow. Whether the story is true or not, there is no doubt that Miss Glasgow in her books constantly perfected her art.

Her greatest popular successes were *Barren Ground* (1925), *The Romantic Comedians* (1926), and *In This Our Life* (1941). The University of North Carolina conferred on her in 1930 an honorary degree of doctor of literature; and similar honors came from the University of Richmond and Duke University in 1938 and from William and Mary College in 1939. She was the recipient of the Quinquennial Howells Medal for Literature in 1941, the Special Award for Excellence in Literature made by *The Saturday Review of Literature* in 1940, and the Southern Authors Award and the Pulitzer Prize in 1941.
CHAPTER ONE

THE RISE OF REALISM IN THE SOUTH

Everyone who thinks seriously about novels as an art form will admit that they exist to portray human life. Since human life is so varied in its manifestations, so marked by differences of intensity, not only in an individual man or woman, but also in a whole society, it is not surprising that the novels which reflect that life should, in the history of literature, have assumed so many forms and have run the gamut of emotions and moods. The personality and the philosophy of each writer, too, have contributed richly to the texture of our novels. Another important element in the analysis of the novel is the style, which has come to mean not only details of phrasing or diction, but also larger aspects like plot structure, methods of characterization, and the place of environment and interpretation. In fact, a preoccupation with technique, or the methods by which a given segment of life is to be conveyed to the reader, has been the most notable characteristic of novelists in the past seventy-five years, from Howells and James, to Hemingway, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf.

Almost all of this concern with method has been seriously taken up with the problem of how to tell the truth about life. For Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding, this problem resolved itself into simply telling what they saw, or felt, or thought was the truth. Granting at once that these early masters of the English novel were remarkably successful in seeing and telling
the truth, yet, in comparison with James or Joyce or Proust or Doestoevski, they seem no more complex in their reactions to life than the man in the street. Perhaps their relative simplicity is due to the simplicity of eighteenth century life; certainly they had none of the modern complexities growing out of our industrial age and its consequent social unrest, the discoveries of physics, chemistry and biology, and the speculations of philosophy which have disturbed the average man's confidence in himself and in his religious beliefs, and new theories about the nature of man which we call modern psychology. The novelist since Howells and James and the great Europeans has been troubled in his efforts to interpret man and human life in the light of contemporary thought, and he has learned that the old, established techniques no longer seem to work as well as they did for earlier novelists. Therefore, he has been compelled to devise new techniques and experiment with them.

Romantic writers such as Scott or Cooper or Hugo were able to work in much greater freedom than our moderns possess. In an optimistic era, and especially in America where the frontier and the democratic idea filled the common man with a sense of elbow room and freedom, when he was confident that he was the "master of his fate, the captain of his soul," a novelist, too, could handle his material as freely as he chose.¹ Since Rousseau had taught that all men are essentially noble, Scott and Cooper, by straining a bit, could make their men into noble and good heroes and their women into

innocent paragons of virtue, except of course for profligate villains. Life could be twisted from a daily commonplace into a series of exciting adventures, or battles, flights from savages, rescues of the captive, duels, love affairs blooming from a great and beautiful passion, all culminating in a happy ending. In the hands of lesser men like Captain Charles King or Horatio Alger, stories written from the romantic point of view had to plead guilty to such strictures as this one: "The romanticist did not pretend to tell the truth about life."2

Not all critics agree as to what constitutes romance. Henry James, discussing the art of the novel, settled to his own satisfaction the difference between the real and the romantic. The real, he said, consisted in the "things we cannot possibly know, sooner or later, in one way or another." Our lack of experience only has prevented us from coming upon some example of the thing in question. Such conventionally romantic devices as ghosts, forgers, wicked women, villains, pistols and knives—all closely bound with the facing of danger—are therefore not romantic but, in James' sense, real. They might happen sooner or later. The truly romantic, on the contrary, applied to all the things that, "with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage and all the wit and all the adventure, we never directly know." Shakespeare's The Tempest, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Merchant of Venice—to name a few instances—

2 Ibid., 477.
4 Ibid., 32.
can never be reduced to reality. They are romances. So also would be Gothic novels, Scott's histories, Cooper's Leatherstocking Tales, Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter—but only in part. Because an author had to yield, for one reason or another, to the conventions of his day, he made the incidents romantic; but because he was also a serious novelist, he made the psychology true to experience. To induce belief, James continues, an author must lure the reader with the real in place or character, and then when the faculty of reflection and criticism has been drugged, to cut the tie with reality and swing off into the world of dreams.\(^5\)

The test of romance, then, is this: Does a specific incident, does a character, correspond to what our experience has taught us about life or humanity? If it does, it is real; if it does not, it is romantic. The pure romance, therefore, since it is a dream world, cannot pretend to portray real life.

Other interpretations of the romantic spirit are more conventional. Walter Pater has analyzed the romantic spirit into "curiosity and the love of beauty."\(^6\)

It loves the strange (synonym for Pater's "curious") and the beautiful. Just as the strange in life excites wonder and the beautiful affects our feelings, so the conventional romantic novel is primarily the story of the unusual which aims also to arouse the emotions.\(^7\)

It is this emphasis on the emotions, incidentally, which constitutes the characteristic

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5 Ibid., 34.


mark of romanticism. Where the classicist viewed life under the aspect of reason and the realist stressed factual objectivity, the romanticist was inclined to interpret life emotionally. We can learn wisdom from each. If a romantic novel such as The Scarlet Letter or Treasure Island arouses sincere passions, we cannot condemn it as art; we can criticize only its picture of life. When it yields to sentimentality, we cannot even approve its art. This is the fault of most of the inferior fiction written, for instance, by Southern writers after the Civil War.

The worship of beauty in the romantic writer also affects the mood of his book. In the first place, the novelist tends to avoid the unpleasant or the monotonous, which so often becomes, for the uncritical, synonymous with ugliness. Dissatisfied with the materials furnished him by everyday life, "he weaves his story out of different materials from that which his everyday experience offers." He will portray, not some girl he knows and has observed—as a strict realist would, but a girl of his dreams: an ideal girl. A character in a romance, as a consequence, does not usually have the consistency and truth of a character created from observation of actual persons. The idealism in the choice of subject matter should logically be reflected in the language, the images of the style; and this we find to be the case. For example, James Lane Allen's A Kentucky Cardinal is full of green and gold and purple variations on the theme of Southern landscape, but it ignores "the hooded, sinister silence in a Southern summer night, more

8 Ibid., 270.
depressing than all our sorrows." Mary Johnston keeps "a New England dew upon the grass of Virginia all the year round"; and she overlooks "the fever and thirst in the land that predestines not only the life of the forests, but affects the temper and hopes of man." 

It is in part to this characteristic of the romantic writer that is due what we call the atmosphere of romance. In his famous preface to The House of Seven Gables, Hawthorne has explained the art of the romanticist.

When a writer calls his work a romance, it need hardly be observed that he wishes to claim a certain latitude, both as to its fashion and material, which he would not have felt himself entitled to assume, had he professed to be writing a novel. The latter form of composition is presumed to aim at a very minute fidelity, not merely to the possible, but to the probable and ordinary course of man's experience. The former--while, as a work of art, it must rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart--has fairly a right to present that truth under circumstances, to a great extent, of the writer's own choosing or creation. If he thinks fit, also, he may so manage his atmospheric medium as to bring out or mellow the lights, and deepen and enrich the shadows of the picture. He will be wise, no doubt, to make a very moderate use of the privileges here stated, and especially, to mingle the marvelous rather as a slight, delicate, and evanescent flavor, than as any portion of the actual substance of the dish offered to the public.

To sum up, romantic stories conventionally treat of the strange, the remote, the pleasant, the beautiful; they seldom have characters except in

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9 Mrs. L.H. Harris, "Fiction, North and South," The Critic, XLIII (September 1903), 274.

10 Ibid., 274.

bold white or black; these characters pass through exciting and dangerous adventures, culminating happily; and finally, both men and women characters often come from the higher social levels.

Now, while romantic stories, especially historical romances, formed the pabulum of the average reader in the South—as it did of average readers everywhere in America—yet another class of readers was dissatisfied with such dreamy material and looked for a fiction which was closer to the realities of everyday life. A man or woman, accustomed to reflect upon the meaning of life, and the nature of human happiness, could not rest content for long with hairbreadth escapes and certainly not with an interpretation of life which concluded always with a happy ending. Life consists of peaks of happiness coming at greater or less intervals; in between are plains of monotony, often of grim suffering approaching despair. Men and women in real life, moreover, are seldom of heroic stature. It was inevitable, then, that a method of writing which tried to reproduce the material of everyday life as truthfully as possible would be employed to satisfy the reader who wanted stronger meat than romance. This method is called literary realism.

William Dean Howells has defined realism as "nothing more and nothing less than the truthful presentation of material."12 A literary realist looked at the men and women about him, at the society of which they made a part, and in his writing reported what he saw, trying to keep his work true to the motives, the impulses and the principles that shape the actual

life of men and women. He became a note-taker and concentrated on documents rather than on imagination. Indeed, Henry James once remarked that a writer "cannot take too many notes." The result was a literary method characterized by quietness rather than excitement, of accuracy of detail rather than poetic language, of close reporting of actual incident and conversational oddities like dialect. Like Balzac, the realist represented innumerable facts, much after the manner of a scientific research worker.

In fact, the method of realism owes much to the scientific method. The scientist observes closely, records scrupulously everything observed, and is as much interested in the ordinary quiet ways of nature as in the extraordinary or spectacular. If his observation takes him into the realm of the unpleasant, he is not disturbed, but reports what he sees as calmly and objectively as ever. The realist, as the scientist, makes all life his province, but he keeps to what he knows. "Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms."  

Whereas the literary realist took his method from science, he took his material from democracy. The romantic novel had been aristocratic, filled with people of title or with unusual heroes. But in America, democracy had placed all men on the same level. The new fiction described the common man, merchants, professional men, laborers, farmers, all the dozens of levels which make up the American nation. In doing so, the realist was following

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14 Ibid., 166.
the dictum laid down by Howells:

Such beauty and such grandeur as we have is common beauty, common grandeur, or the beauty and grandeur in which the quality of solidarity so prevails that neither distinguishes itself to the disadvantage of anything else. It seems to me that these conditions invite the artist to the study and the appreciation of the common. . . . The arts must become democratic.15

Such a philosophy of writing fiction can be expected to work changes in the technique of the novel. Led by Howells, the new school of writers tried to avoid all plot manipulation, maintaining correctly that real life holds few climaxes. To force character and events into a plot would be artificial and untruthful. The romantic novel frequently aimed at a happy ending, often the wedding of the principal characters with a high hope of unending bliss. The realistic novel, on the other hand, like Howells' A Modern Instance or James' The Golden Bowl, begins with the characters already married or to be married in an early chapter and spends the remainder studying the effect of marriage upon the characters involved. Romantic love gives way to some of the other passions listed by Howells: "The passion of grief, the passion of avarice, the passion of pity, the passion of ambition, the passion of hate, the passion of envy, the passion of devotion, the passion of friendship."16 The mood or atmosphere became quieter and gained added and often deep sincerity.

Besides being the exponent of realism, Howells was the propagandist of what has been called "reticent realism." This term suggests that literary

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15 Howells, op. cit., 146-147.

16 Ibid., 153.
realism has several aspects, which is actually the case. The differences develop out of the problem of what is truth and of how much of that truth is to be told. Howells felt that the realist must tell the truth; in America, however, by reason of the fact that the novel reader is most often a young girl, he argued that a writer cannot tell the whole truth. If he did, he might destroy a girl's innocence, for example, about matters of sex, about which French writers like Zola and Flaubert or a Russian like Tolstoy could be frank, since their readers belonged to a worldly wise class. In principle, but not in practice, Howells believed that sin and vice were as much the province of the literary realist as virtue.

Realists like Hamlin Garland, Ed Howe, and Edward Eggleston, to be sure, were never coarse or frank in the French fashion, but they certainly did not write according to Howells' theory that the normal aspects of American life were pleasant and cheerful. Garland's *Main-Travelled Roads* is a truthful account of the grinding poverty, the terrible working conditions, the grimness of the farmer's life. Ed Howe's *Story of a Country Town* describes unsparingly the meanness, the cruelty of the American village and anticipates Lewis' *Main Street* and Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*. Such novels and stories were powerful criticisms of American life, and as such they were, strictly speaking, departures from the method of pure literary realism; for literary realism requires an author to be objective and to keep his feelings or his judgments about right or wrong rigidly to himself.

17 Ibid., 149.
After Howells, literary realism in America diverged in at least two
directions. One of these was naturalism. Briefly, naturalism is not so
much a method of writing as a philosophy; according to it, man had been
shown by the sciences of biology, physics, and chemistry to be akin to
animals; and just as the animal was studied scientifically, so could man.
An animal was subject to unbending natural laws; the naturalists held
that man's actions, too, were the consequence of certain forces such as
heredity, or secretions of the glands, or environment. They ruled out the
action of the will completely, maintaining that it did not exist. The most
eminent practitioner of this form of novel in France was Zola. Zola's
method was to visit a chosen district of Paris, for instance, study each
inhabitant, compile voluminous notes, and then write out a report of a
"slice of life." The result was a mass of documentation saved from dullness
only by the art of a genius.

This philosophy of naturalism, in which man was the victim of certain
determining factors, was expressed in the work of Frank Norris, Jack London,
Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser. In The Octopus, for example, Norris
pictured the wheat farmers of California as the victims, first of the rail-
road and, secondly, of wheat. The course of their lives was determined by
a good or bad crop and by the problem of marketing it. Stephen Crane's
Maggie: A Girl of the Streets describes the downward course of a girl of
the slums through sin and crime to her death by drowning; she was the victim
of her environment. Although the naturalistic method was supposed to be
strictly objective, apart from its philosophy, it soon in American hands
lost its objectivity and became propagandistic. Thus the books of Jack
London became socialistic tracts; Hamlin Garland's pictures of farm life were preludes to efforts to improve farm conditions. In other words, their novels were realistic in technique but romantic or idealistic in presentation. The subject of the naturalistic novel brings up the matter of a new frankness in vocabulary and incident; sex came out into the open in such works as Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, *Jennie Gerhardt*, and *The Titan*. In England, this phenomenon came earlier, especially in Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* or *Jude the Obscure*, but even here the language was restrained.

If naturalism used the external data of the material sciences, another type of realism used the data of psychology. Henry James was the most artistic novelist in this genre. For him, the proper object of the realist was not so much the facts of life but the character's impression of, or reaction to, these facts. A novel should reveal a mind. "In its broadest definition," he said, "a novel is a personal, direct impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression." 18 The psychological novelist felt, naturally enough, that man is more than a material being; he is a spiritual being, and therefore it is just as legitimate to describe the facts of the mind and soul of a character—though his thoughts and sensations—as it is to describe his outward actions. The "stream of consciousness" technique of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and the special techniques of James, Sherwood Anderson, and D.H. Lawrence were the

18 James, *op. cit.*, 163.
results of this view of fiction.

The modern realist uses whatever techniques of his craft will serve his purpose. Ellen Glasgow, for instance, whose work is the subject of this study, observed the life around her, studied her people, took what notes she needed, and created her novels. She gives us characters who are modified by their environment and molded by their traditions, supplies plenty of facts, lets us watch their minds at work, and suggests an interpretation of life. Her stories are not always pleasant, for the truth is not, nor are they necessarily vulgar. Realism for her is an unflinching fidelity to those aspects of life her interest, her taste, and her uprearing lead her to describe. If, in following her selected road of life, she must walk through muck, she will not hesitate to go on, and if she feels like holding her nose and lifting her skirts she probably will not let you know it. She is too well-bred and too normal in her impulses to choose a road because of the filth to be found on it. 19

Hers is the realism of Robert Frost, who was satisfied with his "potato brushed clean." If she has ignored "the mill towns and the great ports and industrial centers, the apple industry or coal mining or the railroad," 20 she has only kept the first commandment of literary realism, "Realism, like charity, must begin at home." 21

A realist, in other words, must not forget that he is an artist and that art, after all, must select. It would not do to compose a novel merely


by summarizing the notes one has gathered through observation. Where would then be the difference between fiction and straight journalism? Art implies order, and life is not orderly; the data of realism must be brought under the discipline of form. Sherwood Anderson once made this point. An artist, he says, must distinguish between the life of reality and the life of the imagination.

The life of the imagination will always remain separated from the life of reality. It feeds upon the life of reality, but it is not that life—cannot be. Mr. John Marin painting Brooklyn Bridge, Henry Fielding writing Tom Jones, are not trying in the novel and the painting to give us reality. They are striving for a realization in art of something out of their own imaginative experiences, fed, to be sure, upon the life immediately about. A quite different matter from making an actual picture of what they see before them.22

For this reason it is almost absurd to say that a writer can keep himself totally aloof from his subject. As soon as he selects a subject, he reveals himself and his interests. Even his method gives him away. In reducing the mass of materials at his disposal from life into the orderliness of an artistic product, in lighting up some aspects of character at the expense of others, he suggests his own philosophy of life. It is thus that the great novelists have taught us to see what Ellen Glasgow calls "the passion, pity, ecstasy and anguish, hope and despair of life."23 What the realist tries to do, actually, is to keep himself as much as possible from

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obtruding personally upon his characters, trying to avoid the excessive feeling or sentimentality of Dickens, on one hand, and the preaching or moralizing of Thackeray, on the other; yet at the same time knowing that his personal insight into reality distinguishes him as an artist from other artists.

This kind of realism is what I think Hamlin Garland was the first to call "veritism." Ellen Glasgow is such a verist. In a series of prefaces to a collected edition of her works she has analyzed the art of fiction, and on this question of veritism she has this to say:

The 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. Whenever it has achieved true greatness, as we find in the work of Flaubert, for example, it is because genius instinctively rejects every formula, including its own, and the art of fiction has triumphed over and absorbed the nature of facts.24

The intellect, as well as feeling, is essential to literature. To quote Miss Glasgow again, "The true realists must illuminate experience, not merely transcribe it."25

After these preliminary definitions, we can begin to examine briefly the condition of Southern letters at the time Ellen Glasgow began to write in the 1890's. She began her fiction while the movement of literary realism in America was still in ferment, and of course she felt the "invigo-

24 Ibid., 28.
25 Ibid., 14.
rating inspiration of the great realists." 26 She was of her age and her environment; if, on the one hand, her omnivorous reading of the classics and the best books of her day brought her into the main stream of literary tradition and exposed her to realism, on the other hand, she was, by her upbringing, a child of Virginia and the South. Most of her works are a mixture of romance and realism. "I was never a pure romancer," she has said, "any more than I was a pure realist." 27

The romantic strain in her character came in part from the fact that the South has for long been a land of romance. After the local colorists of the mid-nineteenth century had almost exhausted the vein of New England and the West, suddenly it was discovered that the South was a field infinitely richer.

Nowhere else were to be found such a variety of picturesque types of humanity: negroes, crackers, creoles, mountaineers, moonshiners, and all those incongruous elements that had resulted from the great social upheaval of 1861-1865. Behind it in an increasingly romantic perspective lay the old regime destroyed by the war; nearer was the war itself, most heroic of struggles; and still nearer was the tragedy of reconstruction with its carpet-bagger, its freed slaves, and its Ku Klux terror. 28

The literature that sprang from this material was predominantly

26 Ibid., 67.
27 Ibid., 27.
romantic. The pictures, for instance, which Cable painted of New Orleans in *Old Creole Days* (1879) were mostly evocations of a charming era and a charming people. Unlike some of the realists, Cable was not critical of that chivalric society. Yet like the realists, he drew vivid portraits of men and women and made minute word drawings of Creole architecture—the first from imagination, the second from observation. The women have an exotic quality we associate with romance, an aura of strangeness which "the elided and softly lisping dialect, broken-down French rather than debased English" accentuates. 29 The characters are real, but the atmosphere in which they are bathed does not seem to be. In his novels set in the same backgrounds as *Old Creole Days*, Cable anticipated the later realists of the South in vivid character portrayals and in occasional passages like the chapters in *Bonaventure* which tell with "minute and terrifying realism the incidents of a flood in the canebrakes." 30 Dr. Sevier is not really a romance, except in plot, but "an attack upon the speculative spirit of New Orleans and its unsanitary swamp areas made with sternness and undeviating honesty." 31 Cable's novels are unsuccessful artistically because they are episodes—short stories or sketches—instead of a unified whole. They are significant, however, in literary history because they are a step toward realism.

29 Ibid., 248.
30 Ibid., 249.
Another New Orleans writer, Grace King, tried to correct what she said were Cable's false pictures of Creole life. In *On the Plantation* (1888), *Monsieur Motte* (1888), and *Bayou L'Ombre* (1892), she succeeds in making her characters "not so bewitching as does Cable, but in making them more real and intensely alive." Yet there breathes from them the same kind of Old French air, the same exquisiteness we find in Cable. Grace King was a professed realist, insisting that her romantic pictures were accurate descriptions of the real New Orleans of the past: "I have never written a line that was not realistic, but our life, our circumstances, the heroism of the men and women that surrounded my early horizon—all that was romantic." This theme of the natural romance of Southern environment has been stressed by W.J. Cash, not only for New Orleans, but for the entire section.

The dominant mood, the mood that lingers in the memory, is one of well-nigh drunken reverie—of a hush that seems all the deeper for the far-away mourning of the hounds and the far-away crying of the doves—of such sweet and ineradicable opiates as the rich odors of hot earth and pinewood and the perfume of the magnolia in bloom—of soft languor creeping through the blood and mounting surely to the brain.... It is a mood, in sum, in which directed thinking is all but impossible, a mood in which the mind yields almost perforce to a drift and in which the imagination holds unchecked sway, a mood in which nothing any more seems improbable save the puny inadequateness of fact, nothing incredible save the bareness of truth.

32 Pattee, *op. cit.*, 363.

33 Orians, *op. cit.*, 255.

34 Quoted by Pattee, *op. cit.*, 362.

Other short story writers who handled similar material were Kate Chopin, whose *Bayou Folk* describes with warmth, humor, and pathos the Creoles of Louisiana; and Ruth McEnery Stuart, who painted the non-aristocratic aspects of New Orleans and Louisiana, the poverty-stricken Negroes especially.

Local colorists in other sections of the South were at work, too. The best of them in Georgia was Joel Chandler Harris, whose *Uncle Remus* stories are classic. He used Negro dialect, in which use he was anticipated by Irwin Russell, and he captured the essential Negro spirit. The stories themselves are romantic folklore. Although they try to "render the South as an idyl, yet they capture a fact and a mood which actually existed."36 Harris' sketches of the Georgia cracker are more realistic; for example, "At Teague Poteet's" describes an unheroic picture of crackers dodging the Confederate conscript officers and usually outwitting them—it is Br'er Rabbit in human form. Harris had enough understanding of the Negro, the product of acute observation, to draw in *Uncle Remus* one of the classic characters of American literature; in him Harris made the Negro not the background for a white aristocracy but a living creature valuable for himself alone.37 We have already mentioned Irwin Russell, in whose dialect poems C. Alphonso Smith saw "a transition of vital significance—partly foretold by Longstreet and Richard M. Johnston."38 After him, Southern

37 Pattee, *op. cit.*, 305.
writers were to interpret life at close range—with the methods of local color—but without the expansion and larger canvas of the novel. Related to the Georgia group, also, was Mary Noailles Murfree (Charles Egbert Craddock), whose field was the people of the Tennessee mountains. It is not so much the people who attracted her as it was the mountains, which she viewed in a typically romantic spirit. "She was impressed with their wildness, their summer moods with light and shadow, their loneliness and their remote spurs and coves and ragged gaps." The result was that her characters suffered; instead of drawing them as individuals, she makes them often merely picturesque specimens against a picturesque background. She succeeded in exhibiting "the cruelty and narrowness of their lives without sitting in judgment on them, and caught the flavor of their speech without wantonly exploiting its eccentricities." With reservations, the same criticism can be made of the stories of Constance Woolson. Finally, in Corra Harris, we come upon realistic stories of typical Georgia communities. Her Circuit Rider's Wife and The Recording Angel, in which the village of Ruckersville anticipates Gopher Prairie and Spoon River, show "a critical mind and brilliant humor applied to many a Southern idol."

Local color writing, as a movement, turned its eyes on the glory of an

39 Pattee, op. cit., 310.
40 Orians, op. cit., 218.
area. It noted racial and environmental factors and strove to capture other essential features as they affected character. It was a blend of romantic impulses—the interest in the strange and the remote—and a realistic technique. As realists the local colorists concentrated on surface characteristics: customs, dress, food, speech, architecture, and scenery. They tried to reproduce dialect peculiarities faithfully. But since they stressed the picturesque, the outlandish, the crude, since they often exaggerated oddities, they cannot be called strict realists. At best the local color movement made important contributions to realism by insisting on actualities and by turning attention to environment.

The Civil War formed the second treasure trove of Southern material. With few exceptions the novels laid in war time are either "sanguine melodrama or absurd idyls whose lovers are at the front—a tragic theme if tragically and not sentimentally conceived." Miss Glasgow confesses that every Christmas she received as a young girl at least one romance on the Confederacy. "They had, one and all, followed faithfully a well worn and standardized pattern. A gallant Northern invader (though never of the rank and file) must rescue the person and protect the virtue of a spirited yet clinging Southern belle and beauty."43

One of the better Civil War novels was John Esten Cooke's Surry of Eagles Nest (1866). Rooted in some of Cooke's own experiences in Richmond from 1861 to 1863, it is the story of the war in Virginia seen through the

43 Glasgow, op. cit., 11.
eyes of an aide of Stonewall Jackson. It is faithful to geography, to
manners, to military strategy; and the realistic descriptions of skirmishes,
forced marches, the iron will of Jackson, and the death of Jackson make
Surry one of the best pictures of the Civil War in American fiction. 44
Cooke was a romancer, and we cannot be surprised to find a strong silent
man, a love interest, a woman who bravely rides through both lines to bring
word to the Southern army, and McClellan discussing his war plans frankly
with his Confederate prisoner, Surry. Forty-five years later, in The Long
Roll (1911), Mary Johnston used the same materials built around the figure
of Jackson and in a romantic plot, although she is closer than Cooke to
actual war conditions in her descriptions and the feelings of soldiers left
behind.

Much of the realism in Civil War novels is the kind to be found in a
campaigner's diary: "Uninspired attempts to reproduce some great fragment
of drama.... Nearly all proved unsatisfactory because of the failure to
relate simply and faithfully the experience of some one person when the war
came and strangely altered the aspect of life." 45 The most popular and
dramatic motive in Civil War literature was that of the Union soldier-love
and the Southern girl. 46 Constance Woolson's story, Rodman the Keeper,

44 Arthur H. Quinn, American Fiction: An Historical and Critical Survey,
45 The Bookman, XV (May, 1902), 258.
46 Rebecca W. Smith, The Civil War and Its Aftermath in American Fiction,
1861-1899 (doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago), 1932, 47.
tells how a Northern soldier gets a job as a cemetery keeper and through faithful devotion, finally wins his Southern sweetheart. The same theme occurs in Thomas Nelson Page's *His Second Campaign* (1883). Another favorite theme was lady spies; apparently, if the romances are to be believed, women by the hundreds wandered over the battlefields between the opposing lines. One of the first spy stories was *Belle Boyd in Camp and Prison* (1865), purporting to be the adventures of a real spy. This novel was parodied by Bret Harte in his *Condensed Novels*. Rebecca Smith reported in her dissertation that in the historical novels about the Civil war before 1890 these were stock situations:

A noble Union hero and his Southern sweetheart are opposed by a wicked Confederate, a weakling Southern aristocrat, or a brutal Yankee overseer. Soldiers are heroic gentlemen or comic plebeians, the latter often Irish. The greatest variations in handling a type character are shown with the Negro: the noble child of nature; the faithful retainer of chivalry; the comic darkey. The poor white was idealized by humanitarians and realistically portrayed by his neighbors.47

Post war novels and short stories held what Miss Glasgow calls an "elegiac strain."48 The war, of course, had made profound changes in the Southerner's way of living; gone was the openhanded hospitality of former plantation days, and the former aristocracy, especially in Virginia, had lost its lands, its best young men, and had either sunk into extreme poverty or had gone into the city to recoup its fortunes in business. In either case, their lot was hard, and it was natural to hark back sentimen-

47 Ibid., 42.
48 Glasgow, op. cit., 49.
tally to some fair illusion of the past, whether it actually existed or not. The passing of the good old days and the presence of sharp and unpleasant reality were alike to be attributed to the wrongs suffered from the Northern soldiers. "To defend the lost became the solitary purpose and the supreme obligation of the Southern novelist."^49 "Our novelists are expected to uphold the South, her prejudices and her glories."^50 A critical realism could not develop under such circumstances. In fact, in spite of his culture and education, a Southerner could not for various reasons afford to be critical; nor in many outlying places, can he even today. "The power of criticism, which is one of the prime forces in modern thought," George Woodberry wrote in Harper's in 1903, "never penetrated the South. There was never any place there...for frank expression of a view differing from that of the community."^51 Southerners were conservative (it is not the solid South for nothing), slow to change, content with social distinctions already existing. After the war, Virginia

.....stiffened in its loyalties and grew more charming and vague as its prejudices grew more rigid. It became a society living perpetually in the shadow of the Civil War, a society curiously lacking in the sense of time, but oppressively fanatical when dealing with contemporary problems; obsessed by principle, but living on pluck; dedicated to "culture" and rapidly suspicious of ideas other than its own.\textsuperscript{52}


^50 Mrs. L.H. Harris, \textit{op. cit.}, 275.


Such a society was especially hospitable to the work of Thomas Nelson Page. His *In Old Virginia* is the Old South viewed through the eyes and in the dialect of an old family slave. "Marse Chan" and "Meh Lady" were a sensation when they first appeared in *Scribner's* in 1884. The stories, in the plantation tradition begun by John P. Kennedy, tell of a Virginian world of social inheritance, chivalric ideals, gallant men, beautiful women and a code of sensitive pride and the nicest honor. It is an "idealized world," described by an "idealized negro." Page has produced an illusion wherein we believe both in the days "befo' the war" and in a slave who can tell a consecutive tale, perfect in proportions, and faultless in lights and shadows.*  

His novel, *Red Rock* (1898), is typical of a whole string of elegiac romances. The wrongs of the South during the Reconstruction period are credible, but the novel has a familiar romantic plot. There is a mysterious portrait which falls at propitious moments; its villains, Leech and Sill, are deep-dyed black; a Northern soldier wins over a recalcitrant Southern lady rebel; the hero marries a Northern girl. And in the end, everything turns out happily. The facts of the problem are real, but the handling romanticizes them.

Francis Hopkinson Smith is remembered for his *Colonel Carter of Cartersville*. Carter is a Virginian, a victim of the war, who, like many another Southerner, had gone to New York to make a fortune by promoting a railroad. He is a perfect child in business, but the charm of his manners

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53 Pattee, *op. cit.*, 269.

wins over creditors and a coal mine turns up on his property at the right
time to establish him financially. Smith loves to dwell on the details of
the old regime, a regime that has forever disappeared. "Seldom dealing
with the harsher and sadder phases, he prefers, rather, the quaint and
eccentric, those things that by the very lovelableness of their weaknesses
charm us all."55

Enough has been said to bring out the fact that Southern fiction before
1900 was evasive where the vital contemporary problems were concerned. It
had none of the qualities of Northern novels which showed characters created
from scientific hypotheses, biological or economic; it showed them coming
rather from conventional pride of ancestry. The North's problems were social
and economical and appeared in its novels; the South preferred the pictur-
esque poor white or Negro or dispossessed aristocrat.

Not all novelists can be condemned in this fashion. James Lane Allen,
a Kentuckian of a poor family, began as a regionalist of his native state.
In 1891 he published Flute and Violin, and in rapid succession A Kentucky
Cardinal and Choir Invisible. With A Summer in Arcady (1896) and The Reign
of Law (1900), however, he showed his kinship with Thomas Hardy and the
French novelists. Nature was no longer sympathetic, as it was in his earlier
novels, but now a ruling force. Man is not to be looked upon as apart from
nature, but as a part of nature, moved by forces he does not understand: instincts, heredity, outside physical forces. The Reign of Law links man

55 Carl Holliday, A History of Southern Literature, New York: Neale,
1906, 376.
to nature and draws a parallelism between the life of hemp in the Kentucky fields and the life of man. Of dialect Allen has almost none; of the Negro who so dominates Southern literature he shows only a glimpse in one or two of his earlier sketches. His background is always Kentucky, but there is no attempt to portray personalities or types peculiar to the state. He is working rather in the realm of human life. "One feels that he is sincere, that he stands always on scientific grounds, and that he is telling what he conceives to be the undiminished truth about modern life."56

Southern literature before 1900, as we have seen, was mostly romantic in tone, elegiac where the old ways were concerned, picturesque as to the modern. It was into this romantic-realist milieu that Ellen Glasgow stepped with her first book in 1897—a rebel against the sentimental in Southern letters but a true daughter of Virginian idealism. Thus far, an effort has been made to distinguish the salient features of romanticism and literary realism in American fiction and to trace these features as revealed in the local color movement in the South and in the typical historical fiction written between 1860 and 1900. The next portion of this paper proposes to show the realistic devices in Ellen Glasgow's early novels, her emphasis on character rather than on incident, and her attempt to write a history of manners in the South. At the same time it will indicate briefly the romantic elements in her novels which she was not to throw off until a later time.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HISTORIES OF MANNERS

When in 1925 Ellen Glasgow published *Barren Ground*, the blurb on the jacket announced that with this novel realism crossed the Potomac going South. At once her friends like Stuart Sherman among the critics pointed out that *Barren Ground* was only the twelfth in a long string of realistic novels from her pen. ¹ With her first book she began the task to which she had dedicated her literary life. "I was, in my humble place and way, beginning a solitary revolt against the formal, the false, the affected, the sentimental, and the pretentious, in Southern writing."

She initiated this revolt with *The Descendant*, written when she was about twenty years old. In it, she recoiled from the uniform Southern heroes of fiction and took as her central figure one of the despised and rejected of society, and illegitimate offspring of the peasant or "poor white" class. ³ The remarkable part of this whole proceeding was not that she began writing so young, but that she selected as her subject a character that no well-brought up Southern girl of her day was even supposed to

² *A Certain Measure*, 8.
know about. For the Southern girl, like the heroines of her *Virginia* and *The Sheltered Life*, was insulated against all information or ideas which could possibly prepare her to know and face life on realistic terms. Even in the South, which had very little use for literature as such, it was a small revolt that a Southern girl of good family should ambition authorship. She had to write her first book in secret, with her mother's knowledge. The whole attitude of the South toward women writers is summed up in the words of a character from *The Wheel of Life*: "I can't help being prejudiced against women writers; your father always was. It's as if they really pretended to know as much as a man. When they publish books I suppose they expect men to read them and that in itself is a kind of conceit."

The *Descendant* is the sort of amateur novel to be expected from an immature writer; it is important chiefly because it contains the seeds of much of her later work. In the first place, it was a declaration of war against the convention that women had no intelligence, or less than a man had. From this theme were to grow such books as *Virginia*, *Life and Gabriella*, *The Battle-Ground*, *The Vein of Iron*, and *The Sheltered Life*. Moreover, the book shows "an interest in the individual who must struggle against society, an ability to articulate small details as part of the whole action and to give the feeling of life and a clear sense of landscape as it reflects man's

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Finally, it reflects the influence of her reading in Spencer, Darwin, Haeckel, Huxley, Romanes, Mill, Bagehot, Clifford, and Weissman. The emphasis on biologic determinism indicates her very real admiration for Thomas Hardy, "the first of all novelists, living or dead," and a reading in Ibsen's plays about marriage.

With the publication of The Voice of the People (1898), Ellen Glasgow began a series of novels which was to treat of the life of Virginia and the South, a life still romantic and backward looking in its social customs and ideals but already in process of being overthrown by the rising middle class. Miss Glasgow declared her intentions as follows:

I intended to treat of the static customs of the country, as well as the changing provincial fashions of the small towns and cities. Moreover, I planned to portray the different social orders, and especially, for this would constitute the major theme of my chronicle, the rise of the middle class as the dominant force in Southern democracy.

The books which make up this fictionized social history of Virginia include especially the following:

- The Battle-Ground (1850-1865)
- The Deliverance (1878-1890)
- The Voice of the People (1870-1898)
- The Romance of a Plain Man (1875-1910)
- Virginia (1884-1912)
- Life and Gabriella (1894-1912)
- The Builders (1914-1918)
- One Man in His Time (1918-1922)


7 The Literary Digest, XV (July 24, 1897), 371.

8 A Certain Measure, 4.
Miss Glasgow's remaining six books also fit into the theme of social history, but this theme, beginning with Virginia and Life and Gabriella as transition novels, becomes gradually subordinated to others more universal in nature than the social history of a province. This chapter will discuss her achievement as a social historian and as an exponent of the realist method.

Miss Glasgow's first two books were essentially romantic rebellions with a partial foundation on observation—especially of New York City under the eyes of a chaperone; but since Virginia was far from rebellious in mood in the '90's, she laid them in the more hospitable precincts of a large city. When she cast about for new themes, she discovered that she had actually overlooked a quiet rebellion going on, as it were, in her own backyard. It was a social revolution working through the processes of government and through changing rural and industrial conditions. Here in her own Virginia, she told herself, "was the raw substance of realism. Here were tragedy and comedy and the perpetual conflict of motives." At the same time, she saw a chance to puncture with satire and irony the sentimentality of Southern fiction and to hold up to a mirror a people who refused to face a world of unpleasant facts, who looked at life with "the coloured spectacles of evasive idealism." Although it is not true that she was the only writer since 1865 to break through the sentimental tradition, for Cable had done it in The Grandissimes, longer than anyone else she has consciously

9 Ibid., 61.
10 Ibid., 50.
and consistently rebelled against the weakness of that tradition.11

She knew her own world best, the world of Virginia aristocracy, and as a beginning realist, she studied the strengths and weaknesses of her own kind set against the qualities of the poor white and the middle class. She presents all levels with almost perfect impartiality, though not without tolerance and sympathy, especially for the underdog. The best families are the distillation of a culture and the flowering of a system of manners which had a real existence even as she wrote. In the Old South, this inherited culture possessed grace and beauty and gaiety; but it depended for its existence as a way of living upon the slavery of the Negro. Unless the aristocracy could find sustenance somewhere within itself, it was doomed. In these books, that tradition decays and dies when it shelters itself behind a barrier of romantic memories and outmoded conventions; but it revives when infused with the blood of a democratic element and when it adapts itself to new conditions in economics, politics, and social life.

Her most valuable and characteristic insight into Southern life was to see that "the old aristocracy fiercely kept to the illusion that theirs was a truly feudal society; they needed to believe...that life as they knew it was divided by inveterate principles of caste, that in their caste each man had his place and that there were knightly obligations."12 Her gentlemen were honorable, gallant, blithe, kindly at heart. Courtesy was their

12 Kaxin, op. cit., 260.
The judge in *The Voice of the People* treated Nick Burr with "that quaint courtliness which knew not affectation." When he spoke of great legal minds, he alluded to them as Mr. Chancellor Kent, Mr. Justice Blackstone; to speak of them more familiarly he would have considered an unpardonably gross breach of etiquette. Courtesy toward women extended even to the most trifling incidents of life. When Betty Ambler burnt a plum pudding, her father said to her, "My dear, it's the very best burnt plum pudding I ever ate." Whether this system of manners grew out of a borrowed chivalry or out of the cult of the Pure Southern Woman which came primarily from the necessity of the white man to exalt his women in the eyes of the Negro slave to protect her, is of no special moment here. The point is that it did exist, at least outwardly. For Miss Glasgow was not one to ignore in her stories the curious paradox in which the Southern woman was forced to live up to an impossible and artificial ideal, an ideal set by the very men who were responsible for a condition wherein out of a population of thirteen million Negroes today, less than two million are pure-bloods. Her irony was scathing from the first.

The gentleman of the old school preferred the society of a tavern with his mistress.... But the virtuous old gentlewoman knew her duty, and, what is quite another thing, she performed it to the best of her ability. When the jolly gentleman staggered home in the wee, small hours

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13 *The Voice of the People*, New York: Doubleday, Page, 1898, 162.


of the morning, very red of face, very husky of voice, and very revolting altogether, my lady would be sitting beside her distaff, her powdered hair as unruffled as at noon. She met him thus for fifty years; she greeted him with a wifely kiss; she assisted him to bed, after mixing his night-cap of whiskey and water with her own aristocratic hands. Then she said her prayers and thanked the Lord that Satan had not beguiled her from the path of duty.... When she died, it was at least a week before he went to the tavern, and almost six months before he was able to find a woman virtuous enough to be worth her price.

The gentleman exerted his charm also on those of lower stations than his own. Beverly Brooke in The Ancient Law, by reason of his courtesy and the fact of his good family, forced the tobacco trader Bassett to buy the rotten tobacco he offered for sale. "His unfailing courtesy was his defence. He had ruined his family, and Emily felt that she could have forgiven him more easily if he had ruined it with a less irreproachable manner."

It was a realist who saw these defects in the Southern gentleman and his society, and it was a realist who dared to put them into print. This same Brooke was typical of the weaknesses of the gentleman. "Before crises requiring thought or long patience, the gentleman was prone to discouragement and apathy." Through his apathy and improvidence, Brooke allowed his fine plantation to decay; and because of his laziness a whole tobacco crop, his only possible source of ready money, was spoiled year after year.

17 The Ancient Law, New York: Doubleday, Page, 1908, 94.
18 Monroe, op. cit., 194.
Christopher Blake exhibits another characteristic of the aristocrat: kindness towards the weak. Once, in the midst of the exacting work of curing tobacco, he dropped everything to answer the call for help of a Negro miles away, simply because the Negro had been a family slave before the War. Mrs. Ambler, in The Battle-Ground, and her daughter Betty make the rounds of the sick Negroes on the plantation, administering to them according to their needs. Throughout these books, it is a commonplace for the gentry to give generously to their poorer neighbors, though Miss Glasgow does not look with a kindly eye on the charities of city women. The women in these books are far from helpless in matters of importance; Betty Ambler, although a belle, is able to run a plantation smoothly, and it is she whom Major Lightfoot calls upon to act as housekeeper when his own wife was ill. Eugenia Battle's aunt operated her brother's plantation efficiently when the man of the family, the general himself, could not master the details. The new woman of the aristocracy, Emily Brooke, was the support of the Brooke family as she worked the fields herself and taught school besides. The average historical romance was inclined to overlook the humdrum details of housekeeping; Miss Glasgow does not forget them.

The aristocracy, while it held aloof socially from the poor white, was yet inclined to help him. Judge Bassett offered to educate Nick Burr for the law and take him into his own office in Kingsbury. General Bolingbroke took Ben Starr under his wing after the boy told him his ambition to become president of the General's railroad. Dan Lightfoot, pitying Pinetop's effort to learn his letters, offered to teach him to read and write. Yes, the Southern gentleman, when he lived up to his ideals, was a great man, and
Miss Glasgow probably had the reality in mind when she has Mrs. Blake tell her son: "Remember to be a gentleman, and you will find that will embrace all morality and a good deal of religion." 19

Although the aristocrat was willing to associate with the middle class on purely business or professional bases, he was yet chary of admitting him into his family. Pride of family is a theme which runs through almost all of Miss Glasgow's books, and she sometimes treats it sympathetically and sometimes ironically, as in The Sheltered Life and In This Our Life. It may be worthwhile to examine for a moment the bases of the Southern aristocracy. In The Romance of a Plain Man, two minor characters, Mitty and Matoaca Bland, sisters and aunts of Sally Mickleborough, though they were otherwise divided in principles and outlook, still were united in opposing Sally's marriage to Ben Starr because of "a passionate belief in the integrity of race." 20 In other words, the aristocrats believed they possessed blue blood. W.J. Cash, in The Mind of the South, devotes a good deal of the first third of his book to demolishing this conception. According to him, it was a romantic fiction that every planter was an aristocrat, a fiction sponsored by the North, by novels (Stowe's Simon Legree was a Yankee), by foreigners who saw in the South the fulfilment of dreams of a vanished golden time, and by the fake medievalism of Scottish novels. 21

19 The Deliverance, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1904, 479.
21 Cash, op. cit., 62, 63.
Undoubtedly, a man who owned a large tract of rich, arable land was set apart from his fellows not similarly fortunate. Wealth is a great maker of class distinctions. It is not surprising that a wealthy man should conclude, from the obsequiousness of his poorer neighbors, that he was superior to them and that perhaps he had ancestors to account for this difference. Hence, there was an interest in genealogies, an interest satirized in Cabell's *The Rivet in Grandfather's Neck* (Colonial Musgrave was a genealogist for money). Many of these genealogies were manufactured. A Scot invariably descended from clan chiefs, an Irishman from Brian Boru. Cash quotes an actual record of an upcountry Carolina family (names changed) to show how royalty appeared in the family tree: "Hans Muller, who was a carpenter by trade and the son of Max Muller, who was the son of a Hamburg merchant and the daughter of a German emperor, immigrated in 1742." The name of the princess is significantly omitted.

The aristocrats who walk about in the pages of Miss Glasgow's books believe, nevertheless, in the richness of their blood. This consciousness of class forms one of the themes in *The Deliverance, One Man in His Time*, *The Voice of the People* and *The Romance of a Plain Man* and appears regularly in many of her other novels. Class distinctions, since they existed in real life, were certainly legitimate material for a realistic treatment.

In *The Battle-Ground* we have what at first is another Civil War romance.

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22 Ibid., 64.
What Miss Glasgow has really written is an epitaph on a decaying order, "the last stand in Virginia of the aristocratic tradition." The seeds of decay are surely indicated in the Lightfoot family: the Major's irascibility, his inability to control his household and his grandson are, it is true, pre-eminently typical traits of character; but in the light of the fact that in these early books, Miss Glasgow uses individuals to represent whole classes, the Lightfoot senility is significant. This conclusion is supported also by Dan Lightfoot's choice of a job after his quarrel with his grandfather; the new trend in the aristocratic spirit is shown in his hiring out as a stage driver for a poor white tavern owner.

The army, too, provides an opportunity to analyze the origins of the rising democratic spirit. Dan serves as a private throughout the war—a circumstance which is truly a blow in the face of romance; and in so doing is thrown into the company of many a poor white mountaineer or plainsman. One soldier, Jack Powell, remarks: "Some of the boys raised a row when Pinetop came into our mess, but where every man's fighting for his country, we're all equal, say I." And Big Abel, Dan's body-servant, complains: "Dis yer wah ain' de kin' I'se use ter, caze hit jumbles de quality en de

23 A Certain Measure, 13.
24 Mims, op. cit., 216.
25 The Battle-Ground, 255.
trash tergeder jes' like dey wuz bo'n blood kin."26 Such close contact with the other half of the world gave aristocrat and poor white equal opportunity to assess each other's worth. Dan soon learns us to appreciate Pinetop, a mountaineer in his company. The mountaineer is a realistically drawn type of white Southerner who fights for a cause, the preservation of a slave system which actually keeps him in economic bondage. In Ellen Glasgow's phrase, Pinetop represents "a tragedy within a tragedy."27 He fights, however, out of a patriotic love for an invaded Virginia.

I ain't never own a nigger in my life, and, what's more, I ain't never seen one that's worth owning. Let 'em take 'em and welcome, that's what I said. Bless your life, as I stood out thar I didn't see how I was goin' to fire my musket, till of a jiffy a thought jest jumped into my head and sent me bangin' down that hill. Them folks have set thar feet on old Virginny, was what I thought. They've set thar feet on ole Virginny, and they've got to take 'em off damn quick! 28

It is significant that in Pinetop, the lowest class of poor white, the illiterate, has, through a desire for education, already felt the stirrings of an ambition to rise in the world.

This ambition is realized in the character of Nick Burr, the protagonist of The Voice of the People. As a boy he wanted to become a lawyer and a success among his own people and in the eyes of those above him. "He must

26 Ibid., 342.
27 A Certain Measure, 22.
28 The Battle-Ground, 323.
rise above his work and his people, he must cut his old name anew, he must walk rough-shod where his mind led him—among men who were his superiors only in the accident of a better birthright."²⁹ Burr did not want to be as workburdened as his father before him. Like Lincoln, he rose through sheer effort to success as an attorney, studying law at off moments from the demands of the plow. He is a symbol of the upsurging middle class who have become powerful enough to elect him governor of Virginia. Jonathan Gay in The Miller of Old Church sees the situation clearly. "Before the war one hardly heard of that class—but in the last twenty-five or thirty years it has overrun everything and most of the land about here has passed into its possession.... It will run the State financially as well as politically."³⁰ In itself, a man of the people winning the highest executive office in Virginia is not remarkable historically, for at least seven such men had been so elected in the history of the state. Just at this moment in Virginia history, though, Nick Burr's election is significant more for revealing the elective power of the mass of the people and the leavening action of democracy. The voice of the people, which Burr understood mystically, was powerful in two other respects. Besides putting him into office, its breath of scandal linking his name with a betrayed girl lost him Eugenia Battle, whose family pressure and lack of courage would not let her marry Nick; and at the end, that voice, in the form of a mob, killed him when as governor he acted personally to uphold the law and give a Negro a fair trial.

²⁹ The Voice of the People, 217.

³⁰ The Miller of Old Church, New York: Doubleday, Page, 1911, 84-85.
Hard work and native intelligence and quality had lifted Burr out of the rural poor white class. In the city, a similar revolution was occurring whose story Miss Glasgow tells in *The Romance of a Plain Man*. Everywhere throughout the South, men poor before the war were within two decades or so to embark upon fortunes of staggering size. The story of Buck Duke of North Carolina is legendary. Duke peddled tobacco with his father, Washington Duke, about the countryside to get bread. R.J. Reynolds had come to Winston, North Carolina, perched atop a tobacco wagon and barefoot—not knowing how to read or write until he was already a rich man. The poverty-stricken Cannon family had a similar history; their name today is synonymous with towels. Within twenty years after the war, the cotton industry had mushroomed as a result of a crusade to make the South industrially independent of the North. The fact that whole white families moved from an agrarian economy to virtual industrial slavery—by common agreement closed to the Negro—does not concern us here, except that the men who amassed wealth from the dreams and the sweat of others were often coarse-grained but bold individuals with a talent for watching the cash box.

This cursorily sketched background is vaguely suggested in *The Romance of a Plain Man*; railroading and the tobacco industry are the only two sources of wealth mentioned. It is the story of Ben Starr, the son of a stone mason and a strong-minded woman, from whom Starr gets his determination. One evening as a boy, a wellborn girl, Sally Mickleborough, called him

31 Cash, *op. cit.*, 195.
32 Ibid., 192.
"common" and fired him with an ambition to wipe out this stigma. "I shan't be common always," he told her as he delivered vegetables to her home.33 This ambition crystallized into two purposes: to win Sally as his wife and to accumulate wealth and power as a banker and railroad president to become worthy of her. Native business ability, supplemented by General Bolingbroke's help, enabled Starr to realize his dream of wealth. Persuading a girl of Sally's breeding to marry him was another problem; to do so he had to invade the aristocracy, succeed socially, and overcome the prejudices of Sally's family. He tells Sally's aunt: "I stand or fall by my own worth and by that alone, and your niece, if she marries me, will stand or fall as I do."34 Sally marries Starr, but to succeed socially is another thing entirely for him. In ballrooms he was ill at ease; the open spaces were his native element. He was aware of the gulf existing between himself and the aristocracy; Sally and her kind had different tastes, sharper sensibilities, an appreciation of the finer beauties of life. He saw this difference in sharper focus when his brother President paid an unexpected visit during a party he and Sally were giving. Sally gave her brother-in-law a gracious welcome, but Ben's sister Jennie was ashamed of a brother whose sacrifices had enabled her to move in high society. Starr feels that he can overcome this handicap only by giving Sally all the material luxuries she can desire, unaware that happiness does not lie in money, education, or power. His effort to break through the invisible barrier of class was a

33 The Romance of a Plain Man, 82.
34 Ibid., 303.
failure, and Miss Glasgow points out thereby that a man may marry into a class, but may not be of it. 35 Tragedy lies here, but she converts it into romance by Ben’s sacrifice of his ambitions for the sake of his wife who is ill. 36

Miss Glasgow, in other words, is aware of the nuances of a changing situation. The energy and vigor of a rising middle class cannot wipe out the differences which generations of leisure, good living, the cultivation of learning and manners have bred into the bone of the South’s first families. Mere intermarriage of the two strains will not automatically erase this difference, although it helps in the evolution of one society into another. She underlines this reality in these two stories of the rise of the middle class in her parallel novels of the city and the country just considered.

Interruption of aristocracy and poor white serves as a leveller in two other stories of this period: The Deliverance and The Miller of Old Church. The Deliverance is set in time about fifteen years after the end of the war; it is in the midst of the Reconstruction period and pictures some of the social and economic effects of the war. Christopher Blake belongs to an old plantation family now living in poverty and subsisting on the returns of a small tobacco crop. The family properties have passed,
probably because of fraud, into the hands of Bill Fletcher, a former overseer of the Blakes, who has a son Will and a daughter Maria. Blake's breeding reveals itself in a noble brow under blonde hair; and his hard work as a tiller of the soil and his closeness to nature is indicated by a certain brutality of his mouth. In contrast to Christopher is the plain man, Fletcher; his plainness was written

in the coarse open lines of his face, half-hidden by a bushy gray beard; in his small sparkling eyes, now blue, now brown; in his loose-limbed, shambling movements as he crossed the room. His very clothes spoke, to an acute observer, of a masculine sincerity naked and unashamed—as if his large coffee-spotted cravat would not alter the smallest fold to conceal the stains it bore. Hale, hairy, vehement, not without a quality of Rabelaisian humour, he appeared the last of all men with whom one would associate the burden of a troubled conscience.37

In a romance like Red Rock, Fletcher would have been a villain without redeeming qualities; but Miss Glasgow shows him with the awe of the ignorant in the presence of his educated and cultured daughter—a real aristocrat; and with a sincere love for his son, Will, a weakling through whom Blake kills the elder Fletcher and secures his revenge for the wrong done his family.

Christopher Blake is the embodiment of a period in violent transition.38 He is torn between the motives of a dark hatred, the resentment among the dispossessed against those who have taken over his lands, and a personal love for Maria Fletcher. Love wins out in the end, symbolizing that the old way must learn to get along with the new. Partly because of some notions

37 The Deliverance, 24.
38 A Certain Measure, 35.
Miss Glasgow has derived from her reading about heredity and environment, she makes Christopher's hatred for the Fletchers inherited, a part of his blood; it seeks outlet in revenge. The conflict between the two classes must have been real enough, but the all-absorbing desire for revenge is romantic; it is not, however, melodramatic because it is based on a sound psychology, no matter how distorted. Blake deliberately makes friends with young Will, influences him to do anything for his sake, beginning by disobedience to his father. Gradually Will is led to a dissolute life, in which he engages in drinking bouts, in the pursuit of a girl of the people whom he subsequently is obliged to marry, and in outright revolt against his father. Finally, in a fit of rage he kills his father and runs to Blake for protection; in the meantime, Blake has fallen in love with Maria Fletcher, and this love brings him to a sense of the evil he is doing and leads him to take upon himself Will Fletcher's guilt. In the end Maria and Christopher unite their two stocks in marriage. Another democratic marriage takes place between one of the Blake girls and Jim Weatherby, a plain man but an industrious tobacco grower. When Cynthia Blake protests; her Uncle Tucker, a maimed war veteran, reminds her, "Our levels aren't any bigger than chalk lines in the eyes of God Almighty."39

One other important character in this novel should be mentioned for her symbolic importance: Mrs. Blake. She had spent twenty years of blindness in the belief that the Confederacy had never fallen, that there was no Appomatox, that she still had three hundred slaves, and that she was still

39 The Deliverance, 432.
wealthy—an illusion which was supported by her children and the few Negroes who remained with her. She personified the lost illusions of the South, and she was drawn from life, although her prototype lived in her changed surroundings for only a short time. Her beliefs and her sense of security were so profound that even had her eyes been opened, she would probably have looked upon her fallen fortunes as a huge masquerade. Each of her children conformed to the authentic spirit and manner of a past way of thinking and living. In Virginia there were thousands of daughters of the Confederacy who dragged away their lives in the martyrdom of Cynthia Blake; and in each family may have been a Lila Blake to be preserved a lady for the time when fortune would again smile upon her family.

The Miller of Old Church is a whole skein of mingled themes, but the important idea is the growing strength in the back country of Virginia of the non-aristocrats typified by Abel Revercomb, a miller. His parents were typical, hardworking land-poor whites who had never gathered much fruit from their toil. After the war, the economic and political conditions of this class changed rapidly; the land which had belonged to the few became the property of the many.

At first the lower classes had held back, paralyzed by the burden of slavery. The soil, impoverished, wasted, untilled, rested under the shadow of the old names—the old customs. The mole-like blindness of the poorer whites persisted still for a quarter of a century, and the awakening was possible only after the newer generation had come to its growth. To them the past authority was but a shadow; the past reverence but a delusion.

40 A Certain Measure, 33.

41 The Miller of Old Church, 48.
Abel Revercomb was one of this new generation who had the ambition and the character to break out of the old traditions, first as a miller instead of a farmer, and then as a candidate for local political office. He falls in love with Molly Merryweather, the illegitimate daughter of an aristocrat, Jonathan Gay, Sr., and the daughter of Gay's overseer. Gay had been prevented from marrying the girl of his choice because of the objections of his sister-in-law whose health was so poor he feared to endanger it with the shock of his marriage to a commoner. This tyranny of invalidism and family prejudice is the thread upon which the plot of the novel fundamentally hangs; for Gay is murdered by another lover of the girl, and later his nephew Jonathan is killed by Abel Revercomb's brother Abner who suspected that the younger Jonathan had seduced his sister, Blossom Revercomb. Actually Jonathan and Blossom were married, but they feared to announce their marriage to Mrs. Gay for the same reasons used by the older Gay. A certain number of complications intervene in Abel's love affair with Molly, including Abel's marriage to another girl in his disappointment over a refusal; fortunately, Abel's wife dies before the end of the book and he can marry Molly.

The novel is subject to two symbolic interpretations which are essentially the same. One is that the novel is "not the love story of Molly and Abel, nor even a struggle between the rising middle class and an effete aristocracy out of touch with its neighborhood, but the eternal story of humanity as it meets change and decay and happiness and reversal."42

42 Monroe, op. cit., 165.
The other interpretation calls the book an example of the epic method, which tells a story on two levels: the history of individuals and the history of a race.

In the broadest sense, this story is not so much the history of Molly Merryweather as it is the history of the New South. In the character of Angela Gay we have personified the survival of the old time Southern aristocracy, with its pride and its traditions—a survival that seems with each year to approach extinction and yet clings to life with the amazing tenacity of chronic invalidism. In the older Jonathan we have the bygone type of the reckless, devil-may-care, hotblooded Southerner who at any cost would maintain the family pride; and in the younger Jonathan and Abel Revercomb we have typified the new aristocracy already beginning to yield to the encroachment of the new triumphant democracy. And lastly, in Molly Merryweather herself, we have, if we read Miss Glasgow's thought aright, the future solution of the social problem. In her origin and in her nature, Molly represents a compromise between the upper class and the lower, a combining the better qualities of each; furthermore, she typifies a social intermingling which in its origins was a disgrace but which today, owing to changed conditions, has come to be accepted. Even her marriage has its symbolic significance. Even had he lived she would not have married Jonathan, the last living representative of an effete code of living; she would inevitably have taken the miller—because the young society of the New South is destined more and more to draw fresh strength from the sturdy ranks of the rising democracy.43

If this interpretation seems strained, one need only remember Miss Glasgow's own remarks about this book: "Throughout the book there may be found...a certain symbolic implication."44

One other book, though written several years after the other members of this group, might be mentioned before we proceed with a brief analysis of

43 Frederick T. Cooper, The Bookman, XXXIII (July, 1911), 531.
44 A Certain Measure, 128.
Miss Glasgow's methods of literary realism. This novel, *One Man in His Time*, is more forward looking than the others. It is the story of Gideon Vetch, a man born in a circus tent, who was elected governor of Virginia in the years immediately after the World War. Vetch, a purely fictional character, tries to initiate reforms, according to his campaign promises, and meets with opposition not only from his opponents in the rival party but also from his own followers, from aristocrat absentee rent-collectors, and from the people themselves. Miss Glasgow does not spend time on riots, strikes, and other social disturbances, but concentrates on broader themes. Reforms, she suggests, will not come about through forceful imposition.

Linked with the theme of social change in material ways is the continuing theme of cultural changes in society. This time it is embodied in the Culpepers, a well-to-do and old Virginia family, whose son Stephen is trying to adjust himself to the new forces released by the war. His family stood for traditions, for what was old and therefore often excellent. These traditions of order, of manners, of self-control, older than himself or his parents, "this ancestral custom of good breeding closed over him like the lid of a coffin." 45 On the other side was Patty Vetch, a girl of obscure birth and the adopted child of Gideon Vetch. She represented the realistic spirit of the age, the revolt against the conventions, and she attracted Stephen Culpeper. Stephen had to choose between established custom, personified by another girl, Margaret Blair, to whom his family wished to marry him; and the urge to adventure, to throw off the bondage of his past, to "lose his life

in order that he might find it."46 The novel deals with the ebb and flow of the counter attractions as they affected Stephen; he finally takes the great step, breaks "the web of the tribal instinct"-convention, and marries Patty Vetch. On another plane, this battle between the old and the new, between custom and reforms, is symbolized by Gideon Vetch and his struggle against human selfishness.

These are the themes of the history of manners which make up Ellen Glasgow's first period. The old aristocracy is dying and giving way to the resurgent poor white and middle classes. Political and industrial control are passing away from the less energetic aristocrats. Some members of the upper class align themselves with the new powers through marriage or through acceptance of and adaptation to new ways of living. Such a spirit was symbolized by Emily Brooke in *The Ancient Law*. She worked in the fields and taught school to support her family. "It had seemed to her that the fight was between her spirit and the spirit of the past--between hope and melancholy, between growth and decay."47 She was the spirit of the future rising amid the decaying sentiment of the past.

Although these novels are spiced with romance, especially in certain plots and incidents and in the presence of an idealistic note, they are fundamentally realistic in tenor and method. For the sake of clarity and brevity, the realistic elements will be discussed briefly under the follow-


47 *The Ancient Law*, 89.
Miss Glasgow's characters, as we have seen, are chosen from the aristocracy and the lower classes of Virginia. Some of them, like the miller, the businessman, the uprooted aristocrat, appeared in Southern fiction for the first time as main characters. Even when she writes about an aristocrat like Dan Lightfoot, she gives us a departure from romance convention, for Lightfoot was a failure. Since she has in many cases created her characters from people she has known, they have become memorable for their realism. Unforgettable are Betty Ambler, Ben Starr (although he fades in the last half of his book), Abel Revercomb, Molly Merryweather, Nick Burr, and minor characters like the rural folk in *The Miller of Old Church*, Negroes like Levi and Big Abel, and tradespeople like Mrs. Slade.

In the best practice of the realists she drew her characters from life. Major Lightfoot was a relative of her father's; Mrs. Lightfoot was a great-aunt of her mother's; to some extent Betty Ambler was her own mother; and many of the minor characters in *The Battle-Ground* were sketched from her mother's description of living figures. 48 Christopher Blake she had seen as a young man working in a ploughed field, just as she makes her Mr. Caraway see him in the early chapters of *The Deliverance*. For the Negro characters she went directly to life. 49 General Bolingbroke, Dr. Theophilus Pry, Mrs. Cudlip, Mrs. Boxley, she had known personally; but Sally Mickleborough was a creature of her imagination, a mingling of especially Virginian character-

48 *A Certain Measure*, 20.

Her methods of characterization are to a great extent conventional: characters are revealed through action, dialog, appearance, the viewpoint of others, and especially through a reverie something like the psychological analysis of Henry James. She joins the realists in her emphasis on heredity and environment, although environment is more important to her than biology. In her early novels, however, she places too much reliance on heredity. For example, Akersham's amorality was the result of his illegitimacy, and his taking a mistress was only to be expected of one of his blood; later his desire for respectability was a reversion to his conventional peasant mother. The theme of blood occurs over and over. Christopher had moods when "he felt the kinship with his savage forefathers working in his blood." With him also was "the curse of apathy--that hereditary instinct to let the single throw decide the issue, so characteristic of the reckless Blakes." On the other hand, Dudley Webb's temptation to throw political mud at Nick Burr passed because as a gentleman, "the instinct of generations was stronger than the appeal of the moment."

From the influence of heredity it is only a step toward viewing men

50 Ibid., 74.
51 Ibid., 34.
52 The Descendant, 234.
53 The Deliverance, 93.
54 Ibid., 204.
55 The Voice of the People, 430.
and women as creatures of feeling and instinct, rather than of intellect and will. The relation to the naturalism of Thomas Hardy is obvious in passages like the following. Laura in *The Wheel of Life* concludes that "we're all drawn by wires like puppets, and the strongest wire pulls us in the direction we were meant to go."56 Christopher's hatred for the Fletchers was beyond his control; only the opposite feeling of love for Maria, a natural attraction too, could destroy it. Jonathan Gay thought that emotion overcame reason in women. "Yet he himself was the follower of his feelings rather than his reason because he allowed himself to follow his attraction to Molly."57 He was an "adventurer of the emotions, given to swift despondencies as well as to vivid elations."58 To Abel Revercomb, "people and objects appeared to him less through forms of thought than through colours of the emotions. His character was the result of a veneering of insufficient culture on a groundwork of raw impulse."59 Such passages can be multiplied.

When a work reflects this kind of philosophy, it is hardly surprising to find the idea of fate, which for Ellen Glasgow may be either some inexorable or invincible force, often malignant, or some strongly determining force

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56 *The Wheel of Life*, 454.
57 *The Miller of Old Church*, 385.
58 Ibid., 196.
59 Ibid., 293.
which controls destiny somehow, looming large in her conception of human character. Passages like the following appear frequently. "Judy's soul was crushed like a trapped creature in the iron grip of a hopeless passion." Blossom struggled in the fascination of Gay's personality "like a hare in a trap." Molly and Abel are "two playthings of Nature." 

"Fate had driven Christopher like a whipped hound to the kennel, but he could still snarl back his defiance from the shadow of his obscurity." "The pathetic futility of individual suffering in the midst of a universe that creates and destroys in swarms." 

Sometimes she assigns the working of fate to natural impulse, sometimes to external forces. For instance, Christopher tells Maria, "We must have met sooner or later even if I had run across the world instead of merely across a tobacco field. After all, the world is no bigger than a tobacco field, when it comes to destiny." This abstract force gives way to a "web of circumstance from which there was no escape." Or it becomes confused with intellect or will--surprisingly enough: Nick Burr went back

60 Ibid., 271.
61 Ibid., 293.
62 Ibid., 209.
63 The Deliverance, 202.
64 The Miller of Old Church, 399.
65 The Deliverance, 380.
66 The Wheel of Life, 332.
to his books because "his intellect ordained it, and the ordinance of intellect is fate."67 The little decisions people make and which bring such unexpected consequences are also a kind of fate. Molly had quarreled with Abel because she had taken one turning in a path and not another. The non-philosopher can only wonder why a quarrel is necessarily final.

It is hard to take such confused thinking seriously, but it must be considered in any evaluation of the psychology of Miss Glasgow's characters. Significantly, in later books like Barren Ground, the nobility of character will be measured by the individual's ability to rise superior to the buffetings of such forces; the will comes back into its own. Besides heredity and "fate," environment also plays an important part in her characterization. If Maria Fletcher, for instance, had run true to her blood, she should have been a slattern like those who stand in the yard of many a shanty. But circumstances of wealth and education, not birth, have made her an aristocrat; she is a reversion from type.68 On the other hand, Cynthia Blake, for all her fine birth, had become only a drudge. Maria wonders what Christopher Blake would have become if his circumstances had been different. "I was wondering what that other life would have made of you; the life that I have known and wearied of—a life of petty shams, of sham love, of sham hate, of sham religion. It is all little, you know, and it takes a little Soul to keep alive in it."69 Finally, Dan Lightfoot is molded by circumstances and the sufferings of war into a man. "The old

67 The Voice of the People, 161.
68 A Certain Measure, 39.
69 The Deliverance, 346.
doubt, the old distrust of his own strength, was fallen from him. At the moment he could have gone to Betty, fearless and full of hope, and have said, "Come, for I am grown up at last." 70

It seems appropriate here to mention a favorite device Miss Glasgow uses. She often employs nature as a setting for a mood. If the character is sad, there is a fitting scene, a bleak winter one; if she is beautiful, her beauty is accentuated by a background of natural beauty. Two passages will sufficiently illustrate this device. The first is from The Voice of the People, one of the early books.

The sun was going down behind the blackened branches of the dead oak, and the wide common, spread with golden-rod and life-everlasting, lay like a sea of flame and snow. Eugenia, standing in its midst, a tall woman in a dress of brown, fell in richly with the surrounding colours. Her arms were filled with the yellow plumes and her dress was tinselled with the dried pollen that floated in the air. As Nicholas reached her she was seeking to free herself from the clutch of a crimson briar that crawled along the ground, and in the effort some of the broken stalks slipped from her hold.

The other is from One Man in His Time, written about twenty years later.

Through the long green vista of the trees, there was a shimmer of silver air, and wrapped in this sparkling veil, she saw the bronze statues and the ardent glow of the sunset. Everything at which she looked was steeped in a wonderful golden light; and this light seemed to come, not from the burning horizon, but from the happiness that flooded her thoughts.... The long white road, the arching trees, the glittering dust, the spring flowers blooming in gardens along the roadside, the very faces of the people who passed her; all these things at which she looked were

70 The Battle-Ground, 301.
71 The Voice of the People, 228.
illuminated by this radiance which seemed, in some strange way, to shine not without but within her heart. 72

Passages like these may have evoked the criticism of a reviewer in The Nation: "The landscape is too obtrusive. The most thrilling moments are hyphenated by purple patches of scenery." 73 Two novels in this group, however, do not come under this criticism. The landscape in The Miller of Old Church becomes "one with the mood of the story... the bleak Virginia countryside, red clay roads, sunken gateposts covered with sumach and goldenrod." 74 And in The Deliverance, the different stages of growth of the tobacco crop are traced step by step through the year as Christopher Blake plows, then drops young plants into the earth, later cultivates the growing crop, harvests it, and cures the leaves according to methods which had not changed in Virginia in decades. When the book was first published, readers remarked that its pages were drenched with the smell of tobacco. 75 Miss Glasgow's technique in this book parallels Allen's use of hemp in The Rein of Law.

These accumulated passages which show the influence of Darwinism and the naturalistic novelists, especially Thomas Hardy, would, taken alone and out of context, give a false picture of Ellen Glasgow's conception of character. The truth seems to be that she tried to do the impossible, to

72 One Man in His Time, 286.
73 The Nation, LXX (May 24, 1900), 401.
74 Monroe, op. cit., 165.
75 A Certain Measure, 32.
correlate some poorly assimilated philosophy with a Christian religion of mysticism. This confusion becomes more obvious when one contrasts passages like those quoted above with what Miss Glasgow has to say about the problem of human happiness. It should be unnecessary to point out that happiness is a matter of the human heart, something no science or philosophy of itself can give. It is predominantly a matter of the will, and it is amusing to see that Miss Glasgow forgets about heredity and environment almost totally when she deals with human happiness.

The one element which she stresses in the search for happiness is that material things, pleasure, the satisfaction of desire, do not bring it. Connie Adams (*The Wheel of Life*) left her husband to become the mistress of another man and found only misery. None of the characters, except Adams, in *The Wheel of Life* are happy, although they pursue every possible kind of illusion. Both Maria Fletcher and Ben Starr discovered that money, power, travel, do not bring happiness. "I know that the fulness of life does not come from the things outside us, and that we ourselves must create the beauty in which we live," Maria tells Christopher Blake. 76 Eugenia Battle thought her happiness came from little things, not the great ones. And Corinna Page saw her happiness in unselfishness which she reduced to good manners. 77

Obviously, those who demand too much of life will be disappointed. Reuben Merryweather, before he died, reflected that "never had a hope of his been fulfilled, never had an event fallen out as he had planned it.

76 *The Deliverance*, 434.
77 *One Man in His Time*, 323.
never had a prayer brought him the blessing for which he prayed.78 But even though he was incredibly frustrated in all his desires, he was glad for the beauty of spring. And there is a nobility in his comment to Molly on life and death which expresses the distilled wisdom of the human race:

I've liked life well enough, but I reckon I'll like death even better as soon as I've gotten used to the feel of it. The Lord always appears a heap nearer to the dead, somehow, than He does to the livin', and I shouldn't be amazed to fit it less lonely than life after I'm once safely settled.79

This resignation is the key to happiness, many of her characters decide. Ordway (The Ancient Law) accounts for all the injustice in the world by discerning a divine plan which enables man to be happy even while he suffers.80 His own atonement for a crime had been his salvation; if he had not suffered he would have gone from fraud to fraud like any common crook. Other characters like Laura, Gertie, and Kemper in The Wheel of Life, Christopher Blake, Dan Lightfoot, and Ben Starr find that through suffering and sacrifice they have grown in stature and have received illumination and insight into the things of the spirit. Ordway's aunt told him: "I have learned that the only way to get anything is to give it up."81

This renunciation is really the meaning of deliverance in The Deliverance; Blake in giving up his revenge has won release from the tortures of his hatred. Nick Burr, too, as governor, signed a pardon for Bernard Battle,

78 The Miller of Old Church, 227.
79 Ibid., 215.
80 The Ancient Law, 252.
81 Ibid., 326.
a man who had wronged him, and in so doing "won the victory of his life." 82

Such renunciation implies an act of the will and hence cannot be reconciled with an absolute determinism. The truth is that Miss Glasgow is still formulating her philosophy of life. She was eventually to discard her belief in determinism, but she will still recognize the part that impulse, feeling, habit, character, and outward circumstances play in human life. Interest in her books will arise from a curiosity to know how her characters will react to these influences.

At this point in her career, her characters are inclined to be a kind of natural mystic. Adams saw that he could not be indifferent to his wife's sufferings, no matter how much she had wronged him, because "humanity is one and indivisible, a single organism held together by a common pulse of life." 83 Dan Lightfoot includes also a kinship with all external things, sky and mountains, fields as well as plants and animals—a Hardy-esque rather than a Christian view. Man can find God in his own soul, if he looks for Him; although Ellen Glasgow pays homage to the positivism of her times by calling this presence, not God, but "elemental forces which connect time with eternity..., innumerable and intricate divisions of human fate woven in a single tremendous design." 84

That these ideas are not realistic is debatable; that they are not objective is granted. Somewhat the same observations must be made of Miss

82 The Voice of the People, 365.
83 The Wheel of Life, 146.
84 One Man in His Time, 348.
Glasgow's plot; in the main they are realistic in that they deal in common-places rather than with extravagant incident. The interest comes from how characters react to circumstances; for instance, Dan Lightfoot changes under the impact of war from an irresponsible youth to a serious man. "We care more about the development of the hero's character under the stress of sternly adverse circumstances than we do for the picturesque accessories of the narrative." We have seen how Christopher Blake reacted to the poverty of his life and to his love for Maria. This reaction is not the thing of a few moments; it is allowed to ripen gradually throughout the whole book. "It is by means of this leisurely development the author achieves her largest effects. We know the outcome is inevitable, but we approach it with such deliberation that all the subtle psychological processes of the years find room for analysis and exposition."  

Miss Monroe praises the firm control of plot in The Deliverance. She could hardly have approved Miss Glasgow's use of coincidence in The Miller of Old Church. Abel accidentally sees Molly kiss Gay; this causes a quarrel and they break off their engagement. Judy Hatch appears on the spot, just in time to catch Abel on the rebound. When Gay and Molly are on terms of affection, they meet Blossom on a ride and Blossom blurts out the fact of their marriage. The story of the elder Gay's will comes out just at the moment Gay and Blossom marry and postpones any chance of happiness.

85 The Dial, XXXII (June, 1902), 385.
86 The Dial, XXXVI (February, 1904), 119.
87 Monroe, op. cit., 164.
Judy Hatch dies just in time to allow Molly and Abel to renew their love. Such use of coincidence is unrealistic.

Other romantic elements can be noted in these novels. For instance, there is the happy ending; but it is happy in its note of optimism rather than from any promise of continued bliss. Nick Burr and Gideon Vetch die at the hands of assassins—this smacks of melodrama and the contrived ending. James S. Wilson points out the sentimentality of Maria Fletcher's saving a yellow dog from a pack of hounds and another character's freeing rabbits from traps. Ordway, in The Ancient Law, is romantic in taking upon himself his daughter's guilt and in spending his inheritance to relieve the tyranny of a factory town. It is difficult to believe, first, that Maria is acting realistically in forgiving Christopher after he confesses he has ruined her brother; and, second, that a girl like Maria would fall in love with the noble brow and brutal mouth of an illiterate though well-born Blake.

Before concluding this chapter a word or two must be said about Miss Glasgow's methods of work. Her settings and descriptions are meticulously accurate, even to matters of costume. This accuracy is the result of observation and thorough documentation. She has herself described her working habits. She read the complete files of several newspapers of the War period and a multitude of diaries and letters; she went over the Valley of Virginia for actual settings to be used in The Battle-Ground.

88 James S. Wilson, "Ellen Glasgow's Novels," The Virginia Quarterly IX (October, 1933), 597.

89 A Certain Measure, 21.
The Voice of the People opens with a kind of sight-seeing tour of four or
five different homes, all closely described: Judge Bassett's, General
Battle's, Nick Burr's, and the shanties of several Negro servants. She had
spent many months in Williamsburg, which is her Kingsborough of the story,
gathering material. She persuaded a friend to smuggle her into a political
convention in Richmond so that she would have first-hand material for the
episode in which Burr is nominated. And the governor's mansion, down to
such items as pictures on the walls of the library, is a reproduction of the
actual home. 90 For The Deliverance, she studied the whole process of
growing and curing tobacco crops for use as the background of her novel. 91
She knew well Ben Starr's little house, The Old Market, the Mickleborough
gardens, all the Richmond scenes she describes in The Romance of a Plain
Man. And Jordan's Journey, with Abel Revercomb's mill, was copied from an
original, complete with mill and tavern, in the Tidewater of Virginia.
This is the method of literary realism.

The result was a style full in substance and in accumulation of detail,
often poetic—as in The Miller of Old Church. The following two passages
will illustrate sufficiently her typical manner in these early books. The
first is a description of the interior of Judge Bassett's home:

Judge Bassett crossed to one of the tall windows,
unfastening the heavy inside shutters, from which the
white paint was fast peeling away. As they fell back
a breeze filled the room, and the ivory faces of micro-
phylla roses stared across the deep window-seat. The
place was airy as a summer-house and odorous with the

90 Ibid., 63.
91 Ibid., 32.
essence of roses distilled in the sunshine beyond. On the high plastered walls, above the book-shelves, rows of bygone Bassetts looked down on their departed possessions—stately and severe in the artificial severity of periwigs and starched ruffles... Below them the room was still hallowed by their touch. They asserted themselves in the quaint curves of the rosewood chairs, in the blue patterns upon the willow bowls, and in the choice lavender of the old Wedgwood. Their handiwork was visible in the laborious embroideries of the firescreen near the empty grate, and the spinet in one unlighted corner still guarded their gay and amiable airs.  

The second is a description of the old marketplace in Richmond.

The squalor made Ben Starr feel that he lacked the peculiar virtue which enabled a man to overcome the adverse circumstances in which he was born. The hot August day was drawing to its end, and the stagnant air in which he moved seemed burdened with sweat until it had become a tangible thing... Whole families had swarmed out into the streets, and from time to time he stepped over a negro urchin, who lay flat on his stomach, drinking the juice of an overripe watermelon out of the rind. Above the dirt and squalor the street cries still rang out from covered wagons which crawled ceaselessly back and forth from the country to Old Market. "Water-mil-lion. Wa-ter-mil-l-i-o-n! Hyer's yo' wa-ter-mil-lion fresh f'om de vi-ne." 93

The same attention to detail is evident in her handling of dialect. She wrote these novels at a time when the use of dialect was almost mandatory in a Southern novel. She wrote it so capably that she was declared the equal of Thomas Nelson Page. 94 Today it still corresponds closely in rhythm and sound to the actual spoken language of Virginia Negroes. She did not make all Negroes speak the same way; the educated spoke the white

92 The Voice of the People, 8-9.
93 The Romance of a Plain Man, 113.
94 The Outlook, LXXI (May, 1902), 214.
man's language, except when in moments of stress they lapsed into their natural speech.

Finally, her style is witty. It is frequently marked by epigrams like: "An aristocrat is a man who sits down to think about what his grandfather has done while other men are doing something themselves." But her humor in these first stories is at its best in the mouths of rustic characters like Mrs. Tom Spade or Mrs. Bottom. Here are two typical examples: Mrs. Tom Spade says of marriage,

When a man ain't got a wife or child to nag at he's mighty sho' to turn right round an' begin naggin' at his neighbours, an' that's why it's the bounden duty of every decent woman to marry and save the peace.

And Mrs. Bottom speaks her mind on men and marriage:

I ain't standin' up for 'em, mind you, an' I can't remember that I ever heard anything particular to thar credit as a sex—but po' things as we allow 'em to be, thar don't seem but one way to git along without wantin' 'em, an' that is to have 'em. It's sartain sure, however, that they fill a good deal mo' or yo' thought when they ain't around than when they are.

In this chapter, we have seen how Miss Glasgow broke away from the sentimental ancestor worship of Southern fiction and turned her attention to a realistic presentation of the aristocracy, the rising middle class, and the new forces appearing after the Civil War. Her emphasis is on character from a psychological and true-to-life standpoint, analyzed from a mingled

95 The Descendant, 43.
96 The Deliverence, 475.
97 The Miller of Old Church, 118.
philosophy of diluted Christianity and the results of studies current in her
day in biology and environment. Her method is the documentary realism which
emphasizes accuracy of description and setting and the creation of character
from living types. In the next chapter, a study will be made of four novels
which represent her best work as a realist of character; these books will
continue her social history, but will show more stress on character than on
backgrounds of setting or history.
CHAPTER THREE
THE NOVELS OF CHARACTER

Ellen Glasgow is one of the few American writers who has maintained a steady growth in her career. The themes of the novels to be considered in this chapter reveal a freshened and vigorous creative faculty, in spite of the fact that her province remains the people of her native Virginia. Her style, too, changes from a half-romantic attachment to the past to an ironic and somewhat satiric tone.

In Virginia, Life and Gabriella, Barren Ground, and The Vein of Iron, the principal characters are all women, women who in the major part of the novel have lost their youth. Moreover, they are women engaged in the universal human pursuit—the pursuit of happiness. These novels show how the life and social position of women becomes modified with the changing times in Virginia; but Miss Glasgow looks beneath the surface of social history and reveals the heart of her women throbbing beneath the buffets and cruel disillusionments of life.

The problems of women have harassed the human race for centuries, nor have they yet been solved. Miss Glasgow examines them against the background of marriage and society within the limits of Virginia, it is true; but when we have sat with her in each of these books, the conviction grows that her women breathe the air of universality. The life and struggles of Virginia Pendleton interest us because Virginia is an individual woman; but they interest us, too, because she is one of us. This power to create
living men and women escapes analysis; its results can only be recognized and acknowledged.

The first of these books, Virginia, belongs to a group of three which Miss Glasgow had intended to write.¹ In an interview she declared that in Virginia, her intention was to portray a passive and helpless victim of the ideal of feminine self-sacrifice. The circumstances of life first moulded her and then dominated her. Life and Gabriella was to show a woman produced by the same environment, but instead of being used by circumstances, she would use them to create her own destiny. A third book, never written, was to be about a woman who faces her world with the "weapons of indirect influence or subtlety." All three, but especially Virginia, can be regarded as a contribution to a vigorous feminist movement (to which Miss Glasgow belonged) and an ironically ceremonious burial of the Victorian tradition as much as they can be considered a history of manners. For these books are written on several levels at once: the historical level, which records the change from one manner of living to another; the personal level, which creates a character living and breathing in a real environment; and the ironical, or philosophical, level, in which the author, through a form of satire, shows a society and the individuals of that society striving to realize a dream which at every turn is balked by reality. It is a realism which is destructive of romance and evasion.

The subject of the Virginian lady, now "extinct as the dodo,"² had

¹ The Bookman, XLIII (March, 1916), 81.
² A Certain Measure, 77.
been a minor theme in all her other books. According to the Southern code, she was to be the embodiment of purity and gentleness. As a girl she was to be taught according to the principles of Miss Priscilla Batte; Miss Priscilla clung "passionately to the habits of her ancestors under the impression that she was clinging to their ideals." All the men and women in her class were virtuous; in her world there were no such things as passion, philandering, illegitimacy; unsettling notions of science or economics or race were forbidden her. She could have no opinions of her own; hers were to be shaped by the men in the family. Mrs. Ambler had told Betty: "Women do not need as much sense as men, my dear." And Mrs. Burwell stoutly maintained that she had never been so "unwomanly as to pretend to as much sense as man." Maria Fletcher's reading distinguished her from other women who, if they read at all, enjoyed romances like Scottish Chiefs or Little Women; and when Dudley Webb found Eugenia Battle reading Plato under the trees, he said that "any woman who read Plato ought to be ostracized—unless she happens to be handsome enough to make you overlook it." By a form of cruelty more sadistic than the most shocking barbarities to be found in William Faulkner or Erskine Caldwell, Virginia Pendleton—

4 *The Battle-Ground*, 44.
5 *The Voice of the People*, 168.
Southern woman--was reared in a complete paralysis of her reasoning faculties; and all this on the plea of educating a lady.

The whole history of the South might have been different had women refused to conform to man's ideal of their sex. For the sake of becoming a romantic legend, she sacrificed the right for a rational life outside the emotions and the chance to complete her powers, in short, her right to a complete personality. In the upper classes, the masculine idea of sex was imposed on woman through the traditions of gallantry, in the middle classes through the force of will and a Calvinistic background. 7

In the story of Virginia Pendleton, Miss Glasgow shows what happens to a woman trained according to such principles. Virginia is a young girl in a small town in Virginia; she is the daughter of a minister and of a woman whose ideas of gentility were so rigid that for years she rose early in the morning to scrub floors on her knees in order to be unseen by her neighbors. Virginia marries Oliver Treadwell, a young playwright, and becomes the absorbed mother of three children. After her children arrive, she buries herself in complete domesticity; she neglects her beauty, allows her mind to deteriorate so that she can not meet her husband on equal ground. He betrays his art to support his family, and writes successful potboilers. As Virginia's physical charms fade, the bond of love which had been founded on passion loosens. The rift between them deepens when Oliver writes a play which fails on Broadway; his wife cannot understand the bruises of a soul which needed to heal itself in secret--she rubs the raw sore by trying to make him share his pain with her. In self-defense, Oliver spends a great deal of his time in society without his wife; he is, of course, seen

7 Monroe, op. cit., 155.
with another woman, and Virginia's futile three-day effort to win him back by dressing up her charms and riding after fox had to give way to the demands of nursing her sick son. A successful play brings Oliver into contact with an actress, Margaret Oldcastle, whose freedom from stifling convention and intellectual vigor is a stimulus to their congenial relations; and the tragedy reaches its peak when Oliver asks Virginia for a divorce. The irony -- and the tragedy -- of the story lies in the fact that a woman who had been trained to be an ideally perfect wife loses her husband because she is too much the kind of wife her husband had wanted when he married her.

The theme, then, is that love is not enough to make a marriage happy for a woman. Dorinda Oakley, in Barren Ground, comes to the same conclusion. "There must be something in life besides love." And Mrs. Blake, in an earlier book, told her children:

Love, properly conducted, is a very pleasant form of entertainment. I've enjoyed it mightily myself; but I'm nearing seventy, and the years of love seem very small when I look back. There are many interesting things in a long life, and love for a man is only one among them; which brings me, after all, to the conclusion that the substance of anybody's house is a large price to pay for a single feeling.

Virginia, like her mother before her, had sacrificed herself completely to others. "She had wanted things for Oliver and for the children, but for herself there had been no separate existence apart from them." Oliver had left her; and her two daughters, both of whom belonged to an independent

9 The Deliverance, 201.
10 Virginia, 426.
and wordly-wise generation less dedicated to an outmoded ideal, had no need of her. She was face to face with the dilemma posed by Sally Starr:

Women mustn't be expected to feed always upon their hearts. You tell them to let love fill their lives, and then when their lives are swept bare and clean of everything else, in place of love you leave mere vacancy—just mere vacancy and nothing but that. How can they fill their lives with love when love isn't there—when it's off in the stock market or the railroad, or wherever its practical affairs may be?\(^{11}\)

While love had lasted, Virginia was at least partly happy in her husband and her children. She had possessed this love because as a girl she had been attractive. What about the women who could never have love? Kesiah Blount, in *The Miller of Old Church*, had never married because nature had made her ugly. Convention decreed that she was doomed to maidenhood and to living with her married relatives—like the maiden aunts in *The Battle-Ground*, to putter about in the garden or to take care of household duties; Kesiah could not express herself in art, for which she had a talent, because "any self-expression from a woman, which was not associated with sex, was an affront to convention; that single gift of hers was doomed to wither away."\(^{12}\) Indeed, the artist was not welcome among men either. Tucker Blake had wanted to be a sculptor; instead he remained to fight in the Civil War and be maimed forever. Oliver Treadwell, because he wanted to be married to Virginia, was practically forced by his uncle, Cyrus Treadwell, to work in a bank to support his family; this uncle advised him to write nothing which would "offend anybody."

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11 *The Romance of a Plain Man*, 399.
12 *The Miller of Old Church*, 79.
Kesiah Blount and Virginia did not rebel against the Southern ideal, but women like Matoaca Bland, Susan Treadwell, and Gabriella Fowler did. Matoaca Bland was a spinster by choice; her principles would not let her marry General Bolingbroke, a gentleman, after she discovered his philandering with tavern women. As an escape she devoted herself to a forlorn propaganda to get the franchise for women. She persevered in spite of opposition from women who thought her work unladylike and the good-humored laughter of men who thought women wanted only love, a man to worry about, and a home. 13 Ironically, Matoaca's prejudices would not allow any woman but a lady to vote. 14 Miss Glasgow is far from making fun of feminists (she was a leading feminist herself); but she is too much a realist to expect that the franchise will be a panacea for all women's ills. She is too interested at bottom in the development of women; in an intellectual development and a life outside the emotions. 15 In another way, and as a contrast to Virginia Pendleton, Susan Treadwell, rebels against the traditions defended by her father--himself a lowborn, selfmade man. In her own mother's misery she sees illustrated the truth that a woman who tries to find happiness in marriage irrespective of the man she marries has only illusion to bear her up, an illusion which cannot endure. Reading and independent thinking develop a force of character which attracts where her lack of beauty did not—she is determined that her happiness will not depend on the number of times

13 The Romance of a Plain Man, 94.
14 Ibid., 212.
15 Monroe, op. cit., 154.
men look at her; and though she marries, she chooses a sterling character from the middle class, undeterred by the fact that he makes his living by selling iron bathtubs.

Virginia is a little classic. Its picture of Virginia life is realistic, although as art it may not warrant the praise one reviewer gave it: "A great realistic novel. To hold up the mirror of life, to see the figures there reflected without distorting glamour, or subjective breathings, and then to give honest report of what is seen; this is to be the great writer of fiction." For the times in which she wrote in the South, her realism was also daring. Of the scene between Cyrus Treadwell and his former Negro mistress, the laundress Mandy, who appeals to him to intercede for their son, this comment can be made: no Southern writer until 1913 had ever dared to bring this relationship between white and dark so frankly into the open. One sentence, too, has been singled out: "The acrid odour of her flesh reached Cyrus, but he made no movement to draw away from her."

In Life and Gabriella, Miss Glasgow portrays a woman brought up in the traditional pattern. Gabriella Carr is the daughter of a Southern family impoverished by war and the death of the father. The year is 1895 when she is twenty. Against the opposition of her mother, who would prefer to starve as a lady or live as a parasite upon her equally needy relatives, Gabriella takes the revolutionary step of working for her living as a salesgirl in a millinery shop. She is still child enough of the Southern tradition to think that happiness will come to her through a marriage with George Fowler;

16 North American Review, CXVII (June, 1913), 857.
17 Virginia, quoted by Emily Clark, Innocence Abroad, New York: Knopf, 1931.
ironically, the man she believes to be a paragon of men turns out within six months to be shallow, sensual, selfish, a drunkard, a failure in business, and unfaithful to her. But because Gabriella has "learned that marriage is founded upon a more substantial basis than the romantic emotions of either a wife or a husband," she determines to be amiable and becomes the mother of two children before Fowler deserts her for Florrie Spencer, a nitwit with a figure. Circumstances force her to earn her living in New York as a milliner's assistant. In a few years, she is successful enough to take control of her employer's shop.

The theme, therefore, on the social plane is that a Southern woman does not have to be a clinging vine; that she has natural abilities and hardness of character enough to make an economic success of her life independently of man. Gabriella's love affairs with George Fowler, Arthur Peyton, and Ben O'Hara are also tied in with this general theme. Her marriage to Fowler has destroyed the illusion that with marriage comes inevitable happiness; but during all her time in New York, she has cherished the memory of Arthur Peyton, a former suitor and a Virginia gentleman. After many years she returns to Richmond to speak once more with Peyton and to discover if he still loves her. His manners are still impeccable, but as she looks at him in his middle age, she wonders how her energetic nature "could have borne with his philosophy of hesitation, ...his denial of effort, ...his deeply rooted mistrust of happiness." He is in sharp contrast with the

19 Ibid., 520.
rough, uncouth Ben O’Hara, another poor boy from the Far West risen to fortune. O’Hara embodies "the triumphs and the failures of American democracy--this democracy of ugly fact and of fine ideals, of crooked deeds and of straight feeling, of little codes and of large adventures, of puny lives and heroic deaths." At first repelled by his lack of refinement, Gabriella comes at last to love him—if only for her son’s sake. She recognizes that the vital thing is character. "I wouldn’t change that if I could. I’d like to give him Arthur Peyton’s manner just as I’d like to give myself Fanny’s complexion. But it isn’t possible." At the last she marries O’Hara because she loves him and because to her he is like life—"she must either take him or leave him completely and without reserve or evasion. He was not an ideal, but he had imperfections, and in spite of them she loved him." The symbolism of such a theme is romantic in nature, but the truth that life must be faced boldly and honestly is realism.

These two books represent, then, the decline of the Victorian ideal of the lady. Virginia is at once the most "thorough and the most pathetic picture extant of the American woman as Victorianism conceived, shaped, and misfitted her. But the book is much more than a tract for feminism to point to; it is unexpectedly full and civilized, packed with observation, tinctured with omen and irony." In it Miss Glasgow tells a story with the "truth

20 Ibid., 480.
21 Ibid., 524.
22 Ibid., 524.
of the historian and psychologist, to whom nothing matters so much as fact."24 What was lovely and exquisite in her heroine remains to the last, even when, in confronting the actress who had won her husband, her training as a lady prevents her from making a scene, so that all she can do is walk bravely out of her rival's house. She owns every quality which made the women of her race and time so strong and so weak; her gallantry, unselfishness, her stupidity and sweetness, her perfect social surface preserved at any cost, make "a character who creates her own story."25

If Virginia Pendleton represents the old way, her daughters and Gabriella Carr represent the new. Whereas Virginia is a martyr to the new forces, crushed between her training and life's demands on her for which her training neglected to prepare her, her daughters and Gabriella sturdily stand up to life, demand what they want, and through a hardness of soul, a "vein of iron," get it. Woman no longer is the slave of man or of her emotions.

Stress on character is the theme of two other books about women: Barren Ground and The Vein of Iron. Both Dorinda Oakley and Ada Fincastle are of the same mold as Gabriella; both face life with fortitude and courage, both battle mightily, and both, though defeated by circumstances, are not defeated in spirit.

As social history, Barren Ground deals with what Virginians call "good people." They are the Anglo-Saxon stock who have worked the soil for

25 Clark, op. cit., 60.
generations but who have never risen above their poverty to the level of the best families; unlike the gentry who have preserved customs, history, and the Episcopal church, the good people, ignored alike by history and fiction, have preserved nothing but themselves. They have always been respectable, hardworking men and women like the Oakleys, the Pedlars, and the Ellgoods; they have never been shiftless, poor white trash. With the coming of the tenant system after the war, the old men stayed by the farms, "and their daughters withered dutifully beside them; but the sons of the good people drifted away to the city, where they assumed control of democracy as well as of the political life which has made democracy safe for politics."

No aristocrats appear in this novel, except for the decadent and neurotic Jason Greylock and his dissolute father. The Oakleys are tied close to the land; they have tried to conquer the soil for generations—in vain, for the broomsedge inexorably drives them back. "Thar's one thing sartin sure, you've got to conquer the land in the beginning, or it'll conquer you before you're through with it."

Barren ground and the broomsedge symbolize the fate of the circumstances of life against which men must battle.

Wave by wave, that symbol of desolation encroached in a glimmering tide on the darkened boundaries of Old Farm. It was the one growth in the landscape that thrived

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26 Barren Ground, 5.
27 Ibid., 6.
28 Ibid., 16.
on barrenness; the solitary life that possessed an inexhaustible vitality. To fight it was like fighting the wild, free principle of nature.

If men yield to the broomsedge, they go down to defeat. If they endure, they are like the pine tree (another symbol) of which Dorinda says: "All the meaning of life has gone into it, and all the meaning of the country. Endurance, that's what it is." Dorinda's father was like the pine. But if men fought the broomsedge, drove it back by scientific methods and with sheer courage and hard work, they are like Dorinda Oakley, who has conquered the land. The landscape is not the sunshine and cheer of the old time romance. Rather, for the Oakleys of Virginia, it is a "sullen, resentful soil—a bondage loosed only by death. It is a portent of bleak futility."

Barren Ground is more than a lesson in land reclamation; it is the age-old story of character versus the circumstances which tend to drag men down. Miss Glasgow had resolved, she said, to portray not Southern types alone, "but whole human beings, and to touch, or at least feel for, the universal chords beneath regional variations of character."

For Dorinda Oakley, there are mainly two circumstances which threaten her happiness: the land and her desire for love. Almost despite herself she has fallen in love with Jason Greylock, a physician, and has yielded herself to him when he promised to marry her. When their wedding is a week

29 Ibid., 128.
30 Ibid., 273.
31 Cameron Rogers, "Realism from the Romantic South," The World's Work, L, (May, 1925), 99.
32 A Certain Measure, 152.
away and when she is aware of a coming child, she learns that Jason has jilted her because he is too weak-willed and cowardly to resist his father and has married another girl. In her despair, she tries to shoot Jason, but fails when the gun misfires. When Dorinda sees Jason in his true light, false, vain, contemptible, a coward in bone and marrow, a man who had trampled her pride in the dust out of weakness and not brutality, she slips away to New York to avoid disgrace. There an accident deprives her of her baby. For two years she earns her living, at the same time reading whatever she can find about scientific farming; and when her father dies, she returns to the farm to apply her knowledge. With Nathan Pedlar's help and advice, and through hard work, Dorinda conquers the land and makes a success of farming. With consummate artistry, Miss Glasgow tells a great woman's story, her power to transcend all the bitter reversals of life. "In its heroic substitution of work for love, children, youth, and happiness, the story reaches tragic proportions." With the same artistry, she suggests the slow passage of the seasons. "Not the landscape alone, but the living human figures must reflect the slow rhythm and pause of the seasons, the beginning, the middle, and the end of man's warfare with nature." In the meantime, she has not forgotten Jason, despite the fact that her love for him has died. "He was so woven into her being that she still suffered from his memory." She still is attracted to him as her first

33 Monroe, op. cit., 163.
34 A Certain Measure, 159.
35 Barren Ground, 204.
love; he is a part of her blood, which, try as she might, she cannot completely root out. In the course of time, Dorinda marries Nathan Pedlar, a widower with property; it is not a marriage of love, for Dorinda marries Nathan because his children need her, because he understands her, because she fears loneliness, and because she wants to join two farms together. After a fashion, her marriage is happy; but when Nathan is killed in an accident, she cannot grieve deeply for him. In the meantime, Jason has so deteriorated that, reduced by drink and disease, he is obliged to go to the poorhouse; Dorinda offers to nurse him in her own home until he dies after a few weeks.

As Jason is lowered into his grave, she realizes that all the men she had known, Jason, Nathan, Ellgood, and others, have meant nothing to her. According to the traditions of womankind, the things which ought to have mattered most poignantly—husband, love, children—have in reality not touched her deeply at all. 36

Out of the whirling chaos of her mind, Jason's face emerged; and, dissolving as quickly as it had formed, it reappeared as the face of Nathan, and vanished again to assume the features of Richard Burch, of Bob Ellgood, and of every man she had ever known closely or remotely in her life. They meant nothing. They had no significance, these dissolving faces. Yet as thick and fast as dead leaves they whirled and danced there, disappearing and reassembling in the vacancy of her thoughts as faces, ghosts, dreams, and regrets; as old vibrations that were incomplete; as unconscious impulses which had never quivered into being; as all things that she might have known and had never known in her life. 37

36 James Branch Cabell, The Nation, CXX (May 6, 1925), 522.

37 Barren Ground, 519.
What really mattered for her was the land and her own strong individuality—the possession of her own soul. For women, Dorinda's life has been interpreted as a tragedy; for men, it has been a victory. Stuart Sherman called the book "the fighting edge of romance." "The fighting edge of romance is always reality. It is the cut and thrust of an active will amid the material circumstances of present life." As Dorinda herself reflected, she had conquered through a fighting will: "To go on, taking the moment as it came, surmounting the obstacles, one by one, as they confronted her; to lavish her vital energy on permanent, not fugitive endeavours—these were the resolves which had carried her triumphantly over the years."

Miss Glasgow thought this novel was her best work. Although it lacks humor as a leaven, "in the picture of landscape and the drawing of the characters, it is not mere fiction but a real land and a real life." It is realistic in the only true sense of the word, namely, "the close reflection of the forms and nuances of life in a specific geographic setting, heightened and illuminated through the selective processes of art." As social history, as the story of Virginia's agricultural revival, it is an adequate book; but as the story of an individual woman, of a living, pulsing heart, Barren Ground transcends all formal classifications.

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38 Sherman, op. cit., 73.
39 Barren Ground, 397.
41 Archibald Henderson, The Saturday Review of Literature, I (July 18, 1925), 907.
Between the writing of *Barren Ground* and *The Vein of Iron*, ten years elapsed, during which Miss Glasgow tried her hand successfully at the comedy of manners. *The Vein of Iron* returns to the theme of fortitude and to the setting of the country. As Miss Glasgow said of the novel, she wished to present the Scotch-Presbyterians of the Valley of Virginia in order to make her history complete. Furthermore, she wanted to determine whether the unconquerable spirit of the early pioneers had descended to their children. To do so, she studied the "vein of iron" in three generations of the Fincastle family. "I had known that I was engaged upon a family chronicle, that I was studying, not a single character or group of characters alone, but the vital principle of survival, which has enabled races and individuals to withstand the destructive forces of nature and of civilization." 

Grandmother Fincastle, sustained by her Presbyterian trust in God, used to travel over the mountains alone in the dead of night to bring help to her husband's parishioners. She was still a hardy woman, strong enough to help her granddaughter Ada through the trials of unwed motherhood. Her son John was a Presbyterian clergyman with unorthodox and perhaps pagan notions of religion and philosophy; because he would not abjure these principles, his congregation called for his resignation, and he and his family had to live on his meager earnings as a teacher. Philosophy was his solace. His wife, Mary Evelyn, was loyal to him, of course; but she found her strength, not in religion or in philosophy, but in little things like flowers or a blue bowl.

42 *A Certain Measure*, 167.
43 Ibid., 169.
My courage depends on little things. These little things mean more than themselves. They mean an attitude of soul, a ceremony of living. Your grandmother never could understand that my blue bowl has helped me more than morning prayers. For me, bare Presbyterian doctrine was not enough. I needed a ritual. That is why I have never, not even when we were poorest, let myself think poor. That is why I have never failed to put the crocheted mats on the table, and the candlesticks, with or without candles and the flowers or berries in the blue bowl. 44

Aunt Meg found her relief in her chickens and service to her family. Lastly, there was Ada herself, whose fortitude resided in an indomitable will to possess her own soul in happiness and in her love for her family. The Vein of Iron is chiefly the story of how she bears the many vicissitudes of life which come upon her.

As a girl she was disappointed in not having a doll with real hair; she also became early aware of the cruelty of children who persecuted the village idiot, Toby Waters. Incidentally, cruelty is a recurrent motif in the book, which is as much a criticism of contemporary civilization as the story of a woman's courage. For instance, John Fincastle remarks to his daughter, "We are still savage, my child. What we call civilization is only a different and perhaps higher level of barbarism." 45 To come back to Ada, her love for Ralph McBride is frustrated because of a social convention which forced him into a marriage with a girl who had tricked him into a breach of the rules. Later, when Ralph's wife instituted divorce proceedings, war calls Ralph to France; but before he goes, Ada and Ralph go off together. Ada bears their child amidst the reproach of her family and the scorn of her

village. Her love for Ralph keeps up her courage; but even this love suffers a blow when she finds the returned Ralph a changed man; the cruelty of the human race has made him bitter. Ada marries him anyway.

In Queenborough, to which she and Ralph move, she endures a whole string of troubles. First, jealousy attacks her; then Ralph becomes an invalid as the result of an automobile accident. This forces her to work in a store to support them—her father's salary as a teacher is not enough. The depression drives them and their neighbors to the ragged edge of despair.

Her love for Ralph, the encouragement of her philosopher father, and the deep wells of her own courage carry her through. Her whole character can be perceived from the following passage:

Ralph said: "One thing you can count on in Ada, she'll never let anybody down. Even if she'd married an old minister, she'd have stuck by her bargain."

Ada smiled as she threaded her needle to patch Ranny's trousers. "I like getting the better of life," she tossed back gaily, "and I'm not ashamed that I do."

It was amazing, she thought, knotting the thread and smoothing the triangular patch on her knee, how many things one could find to laugh at on the brink of disaster. If only one took the world as one found it, and did not sit down and wait for something to happen.

The depression had spawned a whole generation of defeated people, but Ada, like the few men and women of the frontier who became great, was not one of them. She rose superior to destiny.

This sketchy outline hardly suggests the power of the book and the greatness of its characters. Ada, John Finchastle, Aunt Meg, Grandmother

46 Ibid., 381.
47 Ibid., 425.
Fincastle, are all living creations. Making up the background in the city are a gathering of the little people who live out their daily lives in pathos, tragedy or comedy. Midkiff, the laborer, who wanted to stay out of the poorhouse and is broken by a bank failure; the Bergens; the Hamblens, who committed suicide rather than go on relief and who found that dignity and decorum were not enough; Mrs. Rawlings, who worked as a scrubwoman to educate her son Bertie, a son who was saved from failure through the generosity and understanding of John Fincastle; the minister and his family who lived in the upstairs apartment; all these are sketched in sharp outline and in few words to live their brief moment on the page. The depression forms part of the background also; but it is merely another circumstance which the times provide—Miss Glasgow does not stress it. It merely helps to emphasize the novel's theme: that neither spiritual nor economic disaster is enough to break the strong bow of the Fincastle courage. In the Scotch-Presbyterian strain, the strain which was the blood of the Virginia pioneers, there is still vitality, in spite of the defeatism with which a machine age surrounds it.

There is a symbolism in the novel, too, apart from the main theme. In John Fincastle, the philosopher, Miss Glasgow was trying to "portray the fate of the philosopher in an era of science, or the scholar in a world of mechanical inventions. "His return to an earlier spiritual age, and to the

48 A Certain Measure, 175.
philosophy of Plotinus, is intellectually and historically accurate."\(^49\)

Grandmother Fincastle exemplified the force of tradition; and Ada and Ralph McBride, who defy convention, indicate the break with that tradition.\(^50\)

The solidarity of family is indicated, too, in the suffering which comes to Grandmother Fincastle from Ada's disgrace. Ada had believed that her life was her own to live and that what she did had no effect on anybody else. "My life was my own, and I thought I'd be the one to suffer if I made a mistake."\(^51\) Yet, in sinning, she was taking the lives of others into her hands.

It is time now to examine Miss Glasgow's realism in these novels at closer range. An emphasis on character is one of the typical traits of the realistic method. Miss Glasgow's characters are allowed to act at will, within the limits of the story; that is, they are not forced into arbitrary situations, but the action develops from the reaction of character to situation. Passionate love is no longer stressed as a dominating motive of human action, although, of course, Miss Glasgow recognizes its existence as an influence.

The action of the will is afforded more value than in the earlier novels which tended to overemphasize heredity and environment. These two influences, naturally, are still in evidence in these novels—as they are in actual life—but no longer as determinants of action. For instance,

\(^49\) Ibid., 171.
\(^50\) Ibid., 173.
\(^51\) The Vein of Iron, 251.
when Virginia went to see Margaret Oldcastle to persuade her to give up Oliver, she was unable to say what she wanted. Something prevented her. In the crucial moment it was principle and not passion that she obeyed; but this principle,

filtering down through the generations, had become so inseparable from the sources of character, that it had passed at last through the intellect into the blood. She could no more have bared her soul to that other woman than she could have stripped her body naked in the market. 52

This evolution of principle, as Miss Glasgow speaks of it here, seems to be a favorite belief. One reason why her novels are so long is that she traces her story through a multitude of small changes; action, for her, is a slow process involving many modifications over a long period of years. This is the typical evolutionary process in science. As a consequence, the stories move through a maze of psychology—a psychology based on the idea of a mind soaked in tradition or habit, a tradition which has become a part of the blood line.

Not that Miss Glasgow ignores other psychological influences. For instance, Oliver falls in love with Virginia in a most natural way. Priscilla Batte casually hinted one day that Virginia cared for him, a remark which easily turned his thoughts to the girl. To "those who have not learned that the insignificant is merely the significant from another angle," what Miss Priscilla said was mere casual byplay. 53 A short time later, she asked Oliver what he meant by "trifling with Miss Virginia"; thus she trans-

52 Virginia, 443.

53 Ibid., 124.
fixed his imagination with the idea of Virginia as a possible wife. In the meantime, Virginia herself attracts him.

She was putting forth all her woman's power as innocently as the honeysuckle puts forth its fragrance. The white moths whirling in their brief passion over the lantern-flame were not more helpless before those inscrutable forces which we call Life)... The longing of all the dead women of her race flowed through her into the softness of the spring evening.

Finally, a week or two later, Cyrus Treadwell shrewdly planted in Oliver's mind the notion of marriage and offered to solve financial difficulties with a job.

With his strange power of reading human nature..., he saw that his nephew was already beginning to struggle against the temptation to yield. And he was wise enough to know that this temptation would become stronger as soon as Oliver felt that the outside pressure was removed. The young man's passion was putting forward a subtler argument than Cyrus could offer.

Miss Glasgow is concerned, too, with the effect of "little things," minor decisions, on human life. To Dorinda Oakley, it seemed that "it was always the little things, not the big ones, that influenced her destiny.... The incident of his going was apparently as trivial as her meeting with Jason on the road, as the failure of her aim when the gun had gone off." Even her blue dress, which she had worn when she met Jason, was a little thing. "When she looked back in later years, it seemed to her that the

54 Ibid., 127.
55 Ibid., 144.
56 Ibid., 163.
57 Barren Ground, 416.
future was packed into that single moment as the kernel is packed into the nut."58 For Gabriella Carr, too, little things were important.

If she had not seen George at Florrie's party—if she had not seen him under a yellow lantern, with the glow in his eyes, and a dreamy waltz floating from the arbour of roses at the end of the garden—if this had not happened, she would have married Arthur instead of George, and her whole life would have been different. Because of a single instant, because of a chance meeting, she had wrecked the happiness of three lives.59

Although chance suggests the "fate" we have discussed in the previous chapter, the little things are important in the theory of realism. For they are the commonplace incidents in everyday life which Howells recommended should become the material of fiction.

Fate—or "Life"—still remains an influence on behavior. Dorinda felt, on the death of her father, that "life was treating her as if she were a straw in the wind, a leaf on a stream.... She had the feeling that she was caught in the whirlpool of universal anarchy, and that she could not by any effort of her will bring order out of chaos."60 Sometimes, the impersonal force is instinct, as in Cyrus Treadwell's case.61 At another time it is society; Ada Fincastle felt that she would have been happy if society had not interfered. "We might have been good and happy all our lives if only people had let us alone."62 Then, of course, there is emotion, like the

58 Ibid., 90.
59 Life and Gabriella, 252.
60 Barren Ground, 253.
61 Virginia, 159.
62 The Vein of Iron, 250.
emotion of love which attacked Dorinda as she rode home with Jason.

Her hands and feet felt like logs. She was in the clutch, she knew, of forces which she did not understand, which she could not discern. And these forces had deprived her of her will at the very moment when they were sweeping her to a place she could not see by a road that was strange to her.

Finally, there is nature, landscape, which we saw to be so powerful a factor in *The Deliverance* and *The Miller of Old Church*. It affects so personal a thing as mood. Dorinda was melancholy because of a wet day. "Some natural melancholy in the scene drifted through her mind and out again into the landscape. She felt anew her kinship with the desolation and with the rain that fell, fine and soft as mist, over it all."64

Yet such recognition of external and internal forces beyond the will does not mislead Miss Glasgow into ignoring the secret corners of the soul. The reality of men and women lies beneath the surface which they show the world around them. When Virginia was faced with the choice of leaving her children or going to Oliver in New York, she hesitated not at all but went to her husband at once. Mrs. Pendleton realized that she did not really understand her daughter, who thus displayed "a secret force of character which even her mother had not suspected that she possessed."65 Dorinda, thinking of Jason, felt that there was a side of him she could not fathom. "The reserve of even one human being was impenetrable."66 And for twenty

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63 Barren Ground, 65.
64 Ibid., 196.
65 Virginia, 249.
66 Barren Ground, 512.
years she and her mother had lived in the same house, yet they were still strangers. "Were people like this everywhere, all over the world, each one a universe in one's self, separate like the stars in a vast emptiness?" 67

In The Vein of Iron, these reserves in human beings are accounted for by selfishness.

No good ever came of expecting people to help. Each human being lived in its own cell of clay, confined within an inert speck of creation, and indifferent to the other millions of cells by which it was surrounded. A whole world of mud-daubers! Like the redwinged insects, less stinging than wasps, that built their nests in the old stable at Ironside. 68

Questionings like these and probing of the soul arise partly out of Miss Glasgow's scepticism and partly out of her ignorance of the reality of the human soul as Catholicism teaches it. For she shows little understanding, for instance, of the power of religion and its supernatural helps. In real life, for most men and women, religion is an essential element of their spiritual life. But in Miss Glasgow's novels, not one character gets a sympathetic treatment where religion is concerned.

One of the minor themes of The Vein of Iron is "the failure of the church to rise to its appointed task of coping with the gigantic badness of human life." 69 Ada Fincastle committed sin with Ralph McBride; instead of suffering remorse, of regarding a good God offended by their fault, she and Ralph look upon Him as a tyrant ready to punish them. "She was not sure that she believed in a God of wrath.... But it made no difference. She had

67 Ibid., 184.
68 The Vein of Iron, 404.
69 Dorothy Canfield, New York Herald-Tribune Books (September 1, 1935), 1.
made her choice, and she was prepared to pay for it with all the rest of her life." 70 Gabriella Carr is indifferent to God: "Religion might have helped her; but it was characteristic of her generation that she should give religion hardly a thought as a possible solution to the problem of life. She wanted to examine, to analyze, to discover; and it was just here that religion hopelessly failed her as a guide." 71 Like Ada, Dorinda also lacked remorse for giving herself to Jason outside of marriage. For Oliver Treadwell, the church was good because it kept the Southern wife straight; for himself, as an influence on any of his actions, it was useless. Virginia, though her father was a minister, prayed as if she were a pagan when her son was stricken with illness.

She prayed, not as she had been taught to pray in her childhood, not with the humble and resigned worship of civilization, but in the wild and threatening lament of a savage who seeks to reach the ears of an implacable deity. In the last twenty-four hours the Unknown Power she entreated had changed, in her imagination, to an idol who responded only to the shedding of blood. 72

This is the Presbyterian God of Ellen Glasgow and her fathers, the God of the Puritans; it is no wonder that her characters can no longer believe in such a God. The wonder is that Miss Glasgow, with all her reading and thinking about life, should be so shallow in her conclusions and so blind in her comprehension of spiritual reality.

What sustains her people then? Why, courage; or happiness; or love.

70 The Vein of Iron, 229.
71 Life and Gabriella, 248.
72 Virginia, 320.
And only courage endures. We have seen what courage does for Dorinda Oakley and for Ada Fincastle. Gabriella is happy because she triumphed. "It's overcoming that really matters.... I am happy because in my little way I stood the test of struggle."73 Dorinda Oakley found her happiness in the land. "At twenty her happiness had depended upon love, and at fifty it depended upon nothing but herself and the land."74 But she was still not satisfied, because she felt that the only thing which made life worth living was "the love that she had never known and the happiness that she had missed."75 Ada Fincastle, too, could not be satisfied with the consolations of the external world. "The core of life was within the heart." Love, too, had lasted for her, not the ecstatic love of youth, but the "solid love of middle age."76 It was unselfish love, the kind she expressed in working for Ralph and her son. In finding happiness within, Ada was like her father to whom his inner life alone, "the secret life of the soul, was vital and intimate and secure."77

This fact of the inner life as a source of happiness explains, at least partly, why almost all her novels end on a note of hope.

73 Life and Gabriella, 474.
74 Barren Ground, 470.
75 Ibid., 522.
76 The Vein of Iron, 462.
77 Ibid., 50.
Miss Glasgow knows that, after all imaginable trials and losses and defeats, life does, illogically and relentlessly, fill the battered human machine with fresh optimism, very much as when, at more palpable filling stations, fresh gasoline is pumped into an automobile.78

In book after book, Ellen Glasgow ends upon a declaration of unshaken faith in an immediately impending future wherein everything will come out all right. For instance, on the last page of Barren Ground, Dorinda muses as follows:

While the soil endured, while the seasons bloomed and drooped, while the ancient, beneficent ritual of sowing and reaping moved in the fields, she knew that she could never despair of contentment.... She saw the rim of the harvest moon shining orange-yellow through the boughs of the harp-shaped pine.... Where beauty exists the understanding soul can never remain desolate.79

This optimism, however, is remote from the evasive idealism which Miss Glasgow criticizes so keenly in her comedies of manners and in almost all her works. Evasive idealism consisted in an inability to face facts; whenever confronted by unpleasantness, it chose to ignore it rather than to cure it. Virginia's parents were typical evasive idealists.

Both cherished the conviction that to acknowledge the evil is in a manner to countenance its existence, and both clung fervently to the belief that a pretty sham has a more intimate relation to morality than has an ugly truth. Yet, so unaware were they of weaving this elaborate tissue of illusion over the world they inhabited that they called the mental process by which they distorted reality, "taking a true view of life."80

78 James Branch Cabell, The Nation, CXX (May 6, 1925), 522.
79 Barren Ground, 525.
80 Virginia, 32.
These evasive idealists were drawn from the life around her in Virginia. According to her practice in the earlier books, Miss Glasgow founded her character portrayals on real life persons, though these people were transmuted by her imagination into individuals with lives of their own. Virginia was such a composite; Cyrus was modeled on a man she saw as she wandered through the streets of Richmond trying to find the proper dwelling for the Treadwells. 81 The scenes in Life and Gabriella were constructed from "minute observation," but the human figures were drawn from "a shifting multitude of visual impressions." 82 Only Ben O'Hara conformed to an original model. The landscape in Barren Ground is faithfully painted from the colors of the Southern landscape, but the character of Dorinda developed of her own accord from a moment's glimpse of her "leaning against the whitewashed wall of the almshouse.... That one revealing incident was the origin of my novel." 83 The Vein of Iron combines two mountain villages, and the history is the result of months of investigation. Most of its characters were supplied by the anecdote or appearance of a real person. 84 The documentation of her early realistic period has given way to a more artistic and imaginative literary creation, although she was to keep always one foot on the ground.

As for plot, in novels of character, it tends to become subordinate. Romantic incident, therefore, has very little opportunity to appear. In

81 A Certain Measure, 86.
82 Ibid., 101.
83 Ibid., 160.
84 Ibid., 170.
these novels, the strong romantic element of the first group of Miss Glasgow's novels has almost vanished. What little remains can be accounted for as the element which exists in any true picture of reality. However, that a character like Dorinda Oakley should fall in love with a weakling like Jason Greylock may easily be considered stretching probability; that she should try to shoot him, though probable, still seems melodramatic.

Miss Glasgow herself admits that, in *The Vein of Iron*, Ralph's submitting to a forced marriage is seemingly improbable. Ralph had been subjected to the agonized conscience of his mother in forms "bordering closely on religious mania. Nor would this surrender of the broken will have been improbable in any long-established society, such as existed all over Virginia, and indeed over the entire South.... I had witnessed one such instance in Richmond, and I had heard indirectly of several others."\(^85\) As John Fincastle said of Ralph, "his mother had ruined her son's childhood and destroyed his faith in himself."\(^86\)

Since Miss Glasgow eschews the ordinary romantic devices for securing plot interest, she was obliged to use others. As a matter of fact, the sight of a character struggling against adverse circumstances is fascinating. This struggle, as we have seen, is the essence of these four books herein considered, although occasionally, it is true, the troubles seem rigged against the character. But Miss Glasgow uses other devices. One of them is to contrast characters. *Life and Gabriella* is typical. There are contrasts

\(^85\) Ibid., 174.

\(^86\) *The Vein of Iron*, 113.
between the active and vigorous Gabriella and her mentally sloven sister Jane and the sensual Florrie Spencer; others between selfish George Fowler and the hesitant and fearful Arthur, and the vibrant Ben O'Hara; and a host of minor contrasts among characters like Miss Polly, Mrs. Carr, young Archibald, Madame Dinard, and brother-in-law Charlie.

Occasionally, she tries technical experimentation, as in the opening chapters of *The Vein of Iron*. In each of six successive chapters, she shifts the angle of vision and tells the story through the viewpoint of a different character for each chapter. Such shifts necessarily remind us of the storyteller behind the scenes, but "each chapter has a density of texture which enables it to stand alone, and the sixth, the portrait of the mother, is a triumph and a delight and a model of what portraiture in writing should be." 87 The grandmother's reverie moves with a slow, rocking vibration, and grows fainter and fainter as drowsiness creeps upon her. John Fincastle's reverie reflects his metaphysical bias; Aunt Meggie's, her practical mind; Mary Evelyn's, her flashes of insight; Ada's, the "staccato cadences of her fanciful, childish musings." 88 Such reverie needs to move only a few inches to border upon the stream-of-consciousness technique. Let this excerpt from *Barren Ground* serve as illustration of her method.

Their first meeting in the road. The way he looked at her. His eyes when he smiled. The red of his hair. His hand when he touched her. The feeling of his arms, of his mouth on hers, of the rough surface of his coat brushing her face. The first time he had kissed her. The

88 *A Certain Measure*, 182.
last time he had kissed her. No. It isn't true. It isn't true. Deep down in her being some isolated point of consciousness, slow, rhythmic, monotonous, like a swinging pendulum, was ticking over and over: It isn't true. It isn't true. True. True. It isn't true. On the surface other thoughts came and went. That horrible old man. A fire in summer. The stench of drunkenness. Tobacco stains on his white beard. A rat watching her from a hole. How she hated rats! 89

Finally, another important device is irony and satire. We have seen Miss Glasgow's use of irony in Virginia and in Life and Gabriella. Of her irony in The Vein of Iron, J. Donald Adams has written: "Anyone who has read her thoughtfully must see that she wears her irony as a shield. It is her buckler against the tragedy of human experience.... Every novelist as deeply intelligent as Ellen Glasgow must view the world with irony; but irony with nothing beyond it is defeat." 90 As for satire, The Vein of Iron forecasts the satire of her last novel, In This Our Life, and its picture of the disintegration of modern culture in the machine age. A few quotations must serve here to indicate the trend of her satire. "They would build a home in the wilderness of machines, as their forefathers had cleared the ground and built a home in the wilderness of trees." 91 Ada saw the crowd scurrying home, "in the shape of a gigantic insect, through currents of wind and rain. They were all alike, she thought, especially the women.... Hundreds of women—of women trying to look like boys and to fill the places of men." 92 John Fincastle observed the immorality of the young: "All this,

89 Barren Ground, 157.
90 J. Donald Adams, New York Times Book Review Section, VI (September 1, 1935) 1.
91 The Vein of Iron, 278.
92 Ibid., 277.
he reminded himself, was merely the form of transition.... But would the perpetual flux and reflux of individualism reduce all personality to the level of mass consciousness...? Would the moron, instead of the meed, inherit democracy?"93 Ralph had to go to a dirty hospital, and there Ada reflected: "The queerest thing in life was that nobody wanted to work the right way simply because it was the right way, not even for the sick and dying."94 When John Fincastle rode home on a bus to his death, he overheard others say that what they needed was more excitement—legalized gambling, horse-racing, and so on.

"People don't want wine any more. Wine's a fancy drink. They want cawn." "Folks are tired of being too decent. They want strong stuff, like they have in the movies. Only they want it real blood and thunder.... It wouldn't surprise me, the way folks need to be toned up, if we even get darkey gouging back again."95

Yet there seems to be hope, though civilizations might be overwhelmed by ignorance, barbarism, and cruelty. "Yet the level would steadily rise, little by little; in the end other unities would emerge from the ruins, and the indestructible will of the world toward life."96

This chapter has endeavored to point out the change in Ellen Glasgow's realism from the symbolism of levels of society to the depiction and analysis of character. Character is conceived as the struggle of individuals against circumstance; and the greatest are those who, though defeated,

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93 Ibid., 294.
94 Ibid., 332.
95 Ibid., 448.
96 Ibid., 359.
are not conquered by adversity. These provide the elements of tragedy and comedy. Apart from the major thesis of struggle and conquest, the characters are analyzed according to a realistic psychology; they are motivated by probable concerns, and though such influences as heredity, environment, religion, the search for happiness, emotion, impulse, and so on, exert their weight of influence, the will receives greater emphasis than in the earlier novels. The setting, and some of the characters, too, are still drawn from real life, but creation is more a matter of the imagination and of art than a mere reproduction of facts. Irony and satire, which are handmaids of realism, are employed, and they will constitute the major interest in the next section, the comedies of manners.
CHAPTER FOUR

THE COMEDIES OF MANNERS

Because of the work of naturalists like Zola and Hardy and of quiet realists like Howells, literary realism has been associated in the popular mind with drabness, sordidness, or dullness. Miss Glasgow's novels do much to dispel this notion, for her work has been done, especially her comedies of manners, "in the belief that beauty and wit are as realistic as ugliness and stupidity." ¹

Her comedies of manners came late in her career. The Romantic Comedians was published in 1926; They Stooped to Folly, in 1929; The Sheltered Life, in 1932; and In This Our Life, which belongs as much to her earlier novels in inspiration as it does to the comedies, was published in 1941. They represent the flowering of her genius as an artist and as an observer of the life around her.²

Miss Glasgow's novels are in the classic tradition; that is to say, they are formal rather than loose in construction. She has studied life in its minutest details, both within and without her characters; and, like the true artists of every generation, she has tried to perceive the universal elements in nature and impose on them an artistic form or style which will bring out with beauty and subtlety her interpretations. For her, reality

¹ James S. Wilson, "Ellen Glasgow: Ironic Idealist," The Virginia Quarterly, XV (Winter, 1939), 126.
² Monroe, op. cit., 145.
is not merely facts, but the principle which gives these facts meaning.

In these comedies of manners, Miss Glasgow has taken what Henry S. Canby has called "the great subject for the novel since its beginning in the eighteenth century, manners."\(^3\) When novels have also been great, it is because they have treated manners, not merely as a surface refinement of behavior, but as "a code of philosophy of life according to which men and women proceed."\(^4\) Like all philosophies, such a code soon suffers attack; it is beaten upon, undercut, gradually crumbled away by the force of a new code of manners. To write of such a change in people's manners and morals, as Ellen Glasgow does, is to write not merely comedy but also tragedy, no matter how witty the style nor how light the atmosphere in which a book is written.

As in her other novels, Miss Glasgow writes about Virginians, but in these books, her people are all of her own class, the class which she knew and understood best. She was the first realist to perceive the comedy of Southern life. The South, she thought, lived by a fiction.

It rationalized failure with such pompous circumlocution that it could ascribe the most sordid tragedies to a defect of manners, and the most violent to bad taste. The great quality of the life she saw all about her was a simple and astonished refusal to admit reality.\(^5\)

She saw that this society which lived on illusions was charming, even ridiculous; but, like Chekov in Russia, she saw, too, that it was passing,

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4 Ibid.

5 Kazin, op. cit., 260.
perhaps already dead. Because she was a part of that society and loved it, she described it with a compassionate sense of the tragedy which envelops the men and women who put their trust in a vanishing culture. This gives "an ironic flavor to her comedy of manners, which makes its wit more biting, without turning bitter the kindliness of her tolerance." 

The irony of her comedy, in which she has few peers in our times, is intellectual. She slips a sharp rapier into the illusions by which her characters live because to her they seem private and vain. She deflates the rationalizations of Victorian gentlemen like Judge Honeywell and the ambitions of ladies like Mary Victoria Littlepage who want to be influences for good, at whatever cost to themselves or others. Her iconoclasm gently derides the "self-immolating, old-fashioned female with faded roses in her cheeks and dying violets in her eyes"; she mocks mercilessly the "ancient egotistical pretensions of the male sex"; she exhibits "the evanescence of sexual passion, the women who become quite disillusioned about love; the men in the humiliating position of loving when they are loved no more." Many of her characters escape being ridiculous by an eyelash; Judge Honeywell escapes, for example, because he disguises his motives for chasing a young girl and believes that she interests him because he wants to protect her.

But Miss Glasgow cannot remain satisfied with the futility of old men

6 James S. Wilson, "Ellen Glasgow's Novels," The Virginia Quarterly, IX (October, 1933), 596.
7 Monroe, op. cit., 146.
8 Sherman, op. cit., 81.
or disenchanted women; to her they suggested with sick horror, the futility, not only of a provincial society, but of mankind. This finds a gradually clearer expression in The Sheltered Life, The Vein of Iron, and In This Our Life. The whole bent of her nature strove to discover "ends which will make the life for men and women, but especially for women, somehow not wholly unworthy of the brief candle which lights them into the long darkness."10

Although all of Ellen Glasgow's novels fit into her general plan of a social history of Virginia from 1850 to about 1940, The Romantic Comedians is only secondarily a history of manners. It is set in time a few years after the World War, and in the person of Annabel Upchurch, it suggests some of the changes which resulted from the war. Primarily, however, the novel deals with the impact of generation on generation, when love or passion is the meeting-ground between them; and it deals also with the tragic figure of a man who all his life has lived by principle and at the end asks why "he has lost his chance of vivid life," a kind of life which he has missed for six decades.11 Seldom has fiction treated the love and moral upheavals of age; its concern generally has been with youth. In The Romantic Comedians, it is the realist as well as the ironist who writes; and Ellen Glasgow treats her theme of the conflict in Judge Honeywell between desire and common sense, good taste, and prudence so well that her characters, "acting without false gesture, follow logically their inevitable destiny and

10 Sherman, op. cit., 80.

11 The Saturday Review of Literature, III (September 25, 1926), 133.
behave as real people would were they in similar predicaments."¹² All the characters in this novel, except Mrs. Upchurch (the repository of good sense), hold the "popular superstition that love and happiness are interchangeable terms."¹³ To Mrs. Upchurch, money is more important, and she considers the Judge, Amanda Lightfoot, her daughter, and Mrs. Bredalbane mere happiness-hunters "little better than a troupe of romantic comedians."¹⁴

This illusion that love and happiness are synonymous Miss Glasgow punctures in the story of sixty-five year old Judge Honeywell's love for twenty year old Annable Upchurch. The story briefly is as follows. Judge Gamaliel Honeywell has lost his wife Cordelia and in spring pays a visit to her grave. Feeling young for his years, he is attracted to the youth and beauty of Annabel Upchurch, a young lady recently jilted by a young man for the sake of a French hussy. Amanda Lightfoot has waited for him for more than thirty years, but her is not attracted to the virtues of his own generation though couched in gray-haired beauty. The Judge's twin sister, Eugenia Bredalbane, who was a rebel to the Victorian tradition of the lady in her youth and who, after a shady moral beginning, has married four times, urges the suitability of Amanda. Bella Upchurch, a practical lady who realizes the advantages of deceit and flattery for getting money, at first hopes to win the Judge for herself with her own middle-aged attractions.

¹⁴ Ibid.
As an engaging widow, she had been approached by "youth without intelligence, by appearance without character, by character without youth, by birth and breeding without another redeeming attribute; but wealth, being the one and only gift she desired, had successfully eluded her grasp." She soon perceives that she cannot charm the Judge for herself, and she arranges that her daughter Annabel should win him, despite the disparity of their years.

Miss Glasgow handles the psychology of the old man with a sureness which made many a man in Richmond wince at its truth. Here is a sample of her analysis of the Judge's rationalizations:

To confer happiness! Surely this was the highest privilege that money could bring! The power to give happiness to others, to restore wounded spirits, especially young and innocent spirits—what could be nobler than this? And inter-fused with his yearning, as starlight inter-fuses a mist, there was the agreeable recollection that some women—very young women in particular, who have been disillusioned by a tragic experience—preferred older men who have learned to be kind without being exacting.

After the wedding, a whole series of disillusionments sets in, culminating finally in Annabel's running away to New York with a younger man.

The final result of the book is that, although each character reaches for happiness, all are frustrated. The first is Amanda Lightfoot. As a young girl, she and Honeywell had been engaged, but a momentary quarrel broke up the match; and the Judge, on the rebound, married Cordelia. It was a marriage of respectability for thirty years, but not of love—hardly any

15 Ibid., 271.
16 Eudora R. Richardson, "Richmond and Its Writers," The Bookman, LXVIII (December, 1928), 451.
17 The Romantic Comedians, 61.
of these marriages seem to turn out happily. In patience, Amanda waited for her lover in the best tradition of the forsaken Victorian lady. "Serene, unselfish, with the reminiscence of a vanished day in her face and figure, she belonged to that fortunate generation of women who had no need to think, since everything was decided for them by the feelings of a lady and the Episcopal Church." She wore blue and lavender, for these had been the Judge's favorite colors, unaware that he had changed his tastes to the more youthful tints of green and red. When the Judge married Annable, Amanda discovered that neither her waiting nor her resignation to spinsterhood brought peace. In spite of "her self-control and her governed mind and her reliance upon God's will, in spite of her attentive nephews and nieces and her vocal canaries, she did not look happy... There was little help to be found in perfect behavior." 

If Amanda Lightfoot and Mrs. Upchurch represent the efforts toward happiness of two older generations, Annabel Upchurch represents the striving of the new generation. She dismissed Amanda and her kind as cowards who fear life and call their fear duty. "They call the chain they have made duty; but, after all, they are not noble; they are only afraid of life. Poor Cousin Amanda! All her virtues are rooted in fear. Never once has she dared to be herself, and she hasn't dreamed that courage to be yourself is the

18 Ibid., 143.
19 Ibid., 151.
20 A Certain Measure, 218.
greatest virtue of all." In marrying Judge Honeywell, she tested her mother's principle that money, in providing a bulwark against the discomforts of poverty, automatically brings happiness. She was willing to put up with the Judge's age, his rigid habits, his inability to sympathize with her views; but in a short time, as was to be expected, she found her marriage unbearable. The women of an older generation in a similar predicament would have done what they called their duty and have made the best of things. That is what the Judge's first wife would have done. The old view, in other words, was that unhappiness must be accepted with a cheerful countenance. Duty to marriage, to parents, meant nothing, however, to Annabel; the thing is to "face life." If you're hurt, don't hide it; tell everybody about it. Suffering is wrong. And when Annabel runs off with another man, she informs the Judge: "I want to live. I want to struggle... Now that I have what I want, nothing else really matters."22

This has a familiar ring. But it is a question, after all, whether Annabel really will have happiness, even though she is with her loved one. Eugenia had told her brother, the Judge, that women do not live by love alone, but by illusions. "Doesn't every woman, my dear brother, possess one until she is wrecked? Woman lives not by love alone, but chiefly by illusions."23 Annabel was not motivated by the supports of the past, to which Eugenia probably referred and whose passing her mother mourned. "Religion,

21 The Romantic Comedians, 324.
22 Ibid., 325.
23 Ibid., 233.
yes, but even more than religion, Mrs. Upchurch craved the efficacious belief in reticence, refinement, in perfect behavior. If the world continued to grow away, not only from God, but from good breeding as well, ...what could be trusted to keep wives contented and the working classes in order?"24 No, Annabel's belief is in her "right to happiness; here is an egoism "so unconscious of duty as to be almost innocent."25 In This Our Life and The Sheltered Life will show this youthful egoism verging on moral anarchy.

Finally, the Judge too is disillusioned. His sister had encouraged him to believe that marrying Amanda would bring him happiness. He had agreed to the marrying, but not to Amanda. The happiness he expected from his marriage to Annabel was not forthcoming. "Like a tantalizing dream of fulfilment, her loveliness was forever near and yet forever unattainable."26 His dream had been to have a home brightened by Annabel's youth and beauty; but he would not allow it to be changed, and his unwillingness is the symbol of the unalterable conflict between youth and age.

He had the vision of his home unchanged but for the sparkling glamour of youth which would soon brighten the old-fashioned rooms. Though he longed for his usual chair by the fire, he could not separate this yearning from the picture of Annabel buried in the deep arms of ruby leather on the opposite side of the hearth. No, what he desired was that each object should remain where Cordelia had placed it, in the precise spot, unaltered in feature yet illumined in aspect by Annabel's girlish charm. Strange

24 Ibid., 193.
25 Henry S. Canby, The Saturday Review of Literature, III (September 25, 1926), 133.
26 The Romantic Comedians, 172.
that he had never realized how he valued his familiar surroundings until they were threatened! 27

He tried to capture his wife's interest by going to dances with her; but he could not dance with her long, nor could he keep awake; and in his futility, as he looked into a mirror, "it seemed to him that a caged eagle gazed back at him from his bright dark eyes—a spirit, restless, craving, eternally unsatisfied, yet with a wild comedy in its despair." 28 This is the old, old tragedy of men who expect to find complete happiness on earth and grasp only fugitive pleasure.

Miss Glasgow's specific contribution to what is, after all, an old theme in literature is her modern Virginian setting, her posing the conflict between a dying system of manners and an eager and selfish new one, her realistic and slightly wistful characters, and her witty deflation of dead and stultifying forms of living. She has no quarrel with ideals or traditions as such; it is only the ideal or tradition which binds the free spirit of man with a dead hand that receives her stinging thrusts. Her witty style, obviously, could not be hampered by voluminous detail or weighty matter; necessarily her art had to select only what could be fitted to her purpose. "She preserves a nice balance between craftsmanship and material," Robert Herrick said of this book. 29 Over everything in the novel her "malicious feminine wit hovers...as the redolent bouquet of fine champagne 1812

27 Ibid., 183.
28 Ibid., 205.
29 The New Republic, XLVIII (December 8, 1926), 91.
rises from the depths of a crystal goblet." 30

If in The Romantic Comedians, the reckless age of Judge Honeywell and the reckless youth of Annabel Upchurch suggest the faintly visible manifestations of a whole civilization disintegrating without and within, 31 They Stooped to Folly defines more and more clearly that the decay in manners is connected, in some obscure fashion, with a corresponding decay in morals. The latter novel on the primary level describes the changes taking place with regard to society's treatment of fallen woman. From this point of view, the novel is a sophisticated Scarlet Letter; but instead of exploring good and evil in the human heart, as Hawthorne does, Miss Glasgow, always conscious of social changes, explores merely manners and the conditions in which they are rooted. Yet, playing in and out of this motif, there is another: the forsaking of standards and the disturbing of values becomes "symbolic of a world in confusion." 32

Miss Glasgow says that They Stooped to Folly was intended to satirize two attitudes toward woman on the part of men: the first, which had its origin in nineteenth century Southern chivalry, regarded woman as an ideal and therefore as an inspiration to man; the second, an outgrowth of the World War, looked upon woman as an impediment, an obstacle, to all his higher activities. "In a large majority of post-war novels, a woman or two

31 A Certain Measure, 221.
32 Ibid., 238.
women or even three women thrust themselves between almost every male character and some bright particular moon for which he is crying."

Her comedy, she thought, "would revolve about the ruined woman in three different periods of time." As it happens, the novel seems to deal, not so much with ruined women, as with good women like Victoria Littlepage and her daughter and the mental reactions of Virginius Littlepage to the world of women around him.

For all three men, Virginius Littlepage and his artist brother Marmaduke and Martin Welding, a neurotic writer and husband of Mary Victoria Littlepage, live in a woman's world. This woman's world, however, is mostly atmospheric and is only slightly suggested by the plot. Virginius Littlepage has asked his daughter, Mary Victoria (a vigorous uplifter now engaged in some sort of activity in post-war Europe) to find Martin Welding, an artist frustrated by America. Welding had loved Milly Burden, Littlepage's secretary, and a child had been born out of wedlock; Milly still loved Welding and wanted him back. Of course, Littlepage does not tell his daughter these facts. Mary Victoria succeeds in finding the man, but instead of persuading him to return to Queenborough to Milly, she marries him on the plea of saving him from himself. Naturally, both Littlepage and Milly Burden are considerably embarrassed; but nothing can be done, and Welding seems to settle matters by running away from both Mary Victoria and Milly.

The Victorians had treated their fallen women with a Puritan severity

33 Ibid., 233.
34 Ibid., 235.
which sought to punish both the sinner and the sin. In the South, despite a watering-down of Puritanism into a polite Episcopalianism, women who had failed to live up to the ideal of virtue and chastity—whether established by men, as Miss Glasgow maintains, or by women—met a terrible social fate. The Church, of course, disowned them; but, though men were inclined to regard their frailty tolerantly but would nevertheless not consider them for marriage, women sacrificed them on the altar of respectability and ostracized them. Aunt Agatha, on her fall, had retired to her room; she appeared at meals, spoke only in monosyllables, and fled at the arrival of guests. A cruel form of civilization had changed "a spirited girl into an elderly Magdalen, as vague and insubstantial as a legend."35 Yet she had fallen "like a lady. She had not divulged the name of her seducer."36 And in comparison with modern Milly Burden and Mary Victoria, she was "too genteel—too proud, if you please, to fight over a man."37 When after thirty years of seclusion, Aunt Agatha's fault was presumably forgotten, she went out into the city to enjoy, with mousy meekness, a daily movie and a visit to a neighborhood soda fountain.

Mrs. Dalrymple, however, refused to bow to these conventions. She escaped to Europe, where such misdemeanors as hers were more lightly regarded; but even she knew that on her return to Queenborough, she would still

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 283.
be an outcast from Queenborough society. Returning from the war with a vacant mind and a well-stored heart, she made an honest effort to occupy herself in legitimate activity. But she had been brought up as a lady, and she was not allowed to act as a lady.

If her preparation for life had been restricted, it appeared that her opportunities for exercise were even more limited... What was left for a fallen lady, she had demanded almost passionately of the Everlasting Purpose, except the most ancient vocation?... She had not failed to observe that for a Southern lady in reduced circumstances and with an impaired reputation, love is the only available means of increasing an income.  

She tempted Virginius Littlepage himself, but the remembrance of his wife, whose goodness demanded fidelity (a moral principle never seems to operate for these people), came between their first kiss; and Virginius escaped home to find his wife had died in his absence.

Victoria was a classic Virginia wife, "perfect in energy and grace, rich in quiet affection, a successful hostess, an admirable mother; but never a lover." She thwarted her husband as "energetically as she inspired him to rise in their world; she preserved his place in the community and kept him from enjoying it; she was so good that she bored him; and so possessive that she absorbed him." Yet, Miss Glasgow makes her more than a type. Marmaduke recognized in her a fundamental distinction of character. Though she observed the formalities of being a lady, when she followed the dictates of her heart she had qualities of greatness. Marmaduke said of her "If she always thinks the wrong thing, she never fails, except by accident,

38 Ibid., 101.
39 Kazin, op. cit., 262.
to do the right one."^40

Mary Victoria, on the other hand, was one of those reforming good women who do incomparable harm in the name of virtue. She took Martin Welding away from Milly Burden; and then, in trying to make him over to her own standards, she drove him to the point of madness. In her jealousy of Milly Burden, she ran after Martin to bring him back after he deserted her, and in so doing broke one of the most ancient rules of the Victorian lady. The women of her mother's generation would have "waited silently for what they wanted, spinning their intricate webs with the eternal patience of nature."^41

In her way, Mary Victoria was a rebel to the old ways at the same time that she justified them. But Milly Burden was the new youth who would have happiness at any cost. The experience of an older generation and the teaching of religion did not appeal to her. "We are determined," she said to Virginius, "to think for ourselves and to make our own sort of ideals.... I want to find out for myself. I want the freedom to live my life as I please. I want to choose the things I believe in."^42 Clifton Fadiman pointed out that Milly Burden's refrain about a right to happiness is not typical of modern youth.

Young Americans of today will probably have their patience sorely tried by Milly's repeated asseverations

^40 They Stooped to Folly, 125.
^41 Ibid., 330.
^42 Ibid., 41.
that she has "a right to life" and "to be happy." They will see only too clearly that Milly has no such right, because she is not sufficiently intelligent or foresighted to make good her claim to freedom.... The business of being "free" is...largely concerned with assuming responsibilities and limiting rather than extending one's desires.43

Milly was the antithesis of the Virginian lady whose life was a model of modesty and sacrifice. Milly and Louisa Goddard agreed in holding that "nothing was worth all the deceit, all the anguish, all the future hope and ineffectual endeavor, all the pretense and parade, all the artificial glamour, and empty posturing, of the great Victorian tradition."44 Thus, when Milly had fallen, she had fallen; "not tearfully, like poor Miss Agatha, nor even lightly, like the slippery Mrs. Dalrymple, but quite naturally, as if it were her own affair."45 Milly sinned with her head high, as if it were no sin; and she won Virginius' sympathy enough to get his reluctant encouragement for her flight to New York where she would be free from her mother and her memories of Martin Welding; though Virginius was experienced enough to know that man nowhere is free from himself.

As in some of Miss Glasgow's other books, They Stooped to Folly is symbolic. The symbolism resides in the characters of the three men: Virginius, Marmaduke, and Welding. Virginius represents the man who lacks the will to act; he is the same hesitant type of Southerner who appeared in Life and Gabriella. He is a cynic or disappointed idealist who has not the

43 Clifton Fadiman, The Nation, CXXIX (August 28, 1929), 226.
44 They Stooped to Folly, 331.
courage to form convictions and follow them. Miss Glasgow calls people like this afraid of life, though she seems occasionally to classify men and women who dare not sin in the same category as those who don't break with convention. She says that Virginius confuses "his will with his emotions." His surrounding world shares his interior anarchy. "His impressions render the truest picture of an age in which he was fated to act the part of both victor and victim." Marmaduke Littlepage represents the "civilized man in despair of civilization, the artist in a society that Classes art among the lesser utilities. Sensitive by nature, he wears, as a protective colouring, the buffoonery of truth." His conversation is full of radicalism. It is his idea that the fear of women has made rabbit souls out of men. "After making a republic you men have not had sufficient courage to keep what you have won from women.... You have turned the American Republic into an oligarchy of maternal instincts." To Victoria, who had criticized the unpleasantness of a portrait of Virginius he was painting, he said: "I am trying with every stroke to get as far away as possible from all the smugness and priggishness we were brought up to believe in. For the last few days, I have been trying to see what Virginius would look like if the old

46 A Certain Measure, 239.
47 Ibid., 238.
48 Ibid., 239.
49 They Stopped to Folly, 130.
Virginia gentleman were wiped out of his face."50 No wonder Richmond winced at Miss Glasgow's Virginia gentlemen; for Marmaduke expresses perfectly his creator's own philosophy.

The third man, Martin Welding, represents the man who feared the thing he loved; he lived in "a perpetual flight from women."51 Two women fight over him, and he flees from both. He is the neurotic who finds civilization too much for him; and he tries to escape it by keeping on the move. Of course, ultimately, unless he turns around to face life courageously, he will probably kill himself. Ironically, his ambition as a writer is to present reality. "Historical novels are all tosh, you know," he tells Virgininius when he advises the writing of Virginia history. "I am interested in life, not in costume and scenery. I want to get at grips with reality."52

Although this novel reveals Miss Glasgow's command of the art of fiction, it is not a good novel. Its characters tend to be abstractions rather than human figures. The reviewers recognized this fact, but they can not agree which characters are real and which are not. One says, "All the characters but Milly Burden are unreal."53 Another says, "All but Mr. Littlepage are types."54 And a third declares all are types, even Milly

50 Ibid., 209.
51 A Certain Measure, 241.
52 They Stooped to Folly, 76.
53 The Saturday Review of Literature, VI (August 3, 1929), 19.
54 The Virginia Quarterly Review, V (1929), 596.
Burden, whose actions are not sufficiently motivated. Such confusion is commentary enough.

The Sheltered Life carries further the theme of a disintegrating world. Ostensibly, it is the tale of the passing of the sheltered lady and an expose of a society which lived on pretense and evasive idealism. The novel is technically a counterpoint of two views of the same circumstances; that of a young girl, Jennie Blair Archbald, and that of her grandfather, General Archbald. In the story, Jennie grows up to be a girl of eighteen; she is sheltered from all the unpleasantness of a school education, the ugly slums generated by industrial changes going on in Queenborough (whose closeness, however, is indicated by an odor which threatens to drive the few remaining good families out of their old homes), and from the realities of passion. She grows up on Little Women; as a girl, she comes into innocent contact with George Birdsong and his mulatto mistress without understanding the situation, and wanders into the slums for a few minutes' observation of a Negro section under the walls of factories.

Her romantic notions of life are sponsored by her mother, Eva Birdsong, and General Archbald. Mrs. Archbald's philosophy of ignoring or covering up unpleasantness is the typical pretense which Miss Glasgow scores at every opportunity. When Jennie inquires why her Aunt Isabella broke her engagement to a young man, her mother replies that Isabella was not sure of her feelings; actually Isabella had been compromised by riding out unchaperoned with another young man at night. Later, when Isabella marries Joseph Cotter.

55 Kenneth Murdock, "Folly and the Ironist," The Virginia Quarterly Review, V (October, 1929), 598.
of low birth, Mrs. Archbald, by a simple twist of the facts, no longer thinks of Cotter as a plain carpenter but as a quiet one, a twist made "so much easier by the first important step from the Baptist Communion to the Episcopal Church." 56 Jennie once caught her mother with her guard of pleasantness down. "Stripped of her pleasant smile, stripped even of her sunny disposition, she was only a tired middle-aged woman, who rested for one precious hour, from the wearing endeavor to look on the bright side of things and hope for the best." 57 Mrs. Archbald was one of those kind women who are incapable of telling the truth because the truth is cruel.

Eva Birdsong had married George Birdsong for love; because of it she had sacrificed a possibly great career as a singer. "You will know that a great love doesn't leave room for anything else in a woman's life," she told Jennie one day. 58 Like Mrs. Archbald, Mrs. Birdsong pretended that unpleasantness did not exist. She ignored her husband's frequent infidelities because George had loved in her the ideal woman--and the ideal woman would not fight for a man or make a scene. Living up to an ideal is always difficult. As she lay deathly sick in the hospital, John Welch says that "if she dies it will be the long pretense of her life that has killed her." 59 Jealous of her husband, she did not draw a natural breath since she married; nevertheless, she pretended to a radiance of personality every time her husband looked at her. On the way to the operating table, she smiled into

56 The Sheltered Life, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1932, 133.
57 Ibid., 92.
58 Ibid., 74.
59 Ibid., 207.
his eyes; but when he looked away, General Archbald saw her relax into the worried, troubled, sick woman she really was. Finally, when her husband continues his unfaithfulness to the point of encouraging Jennie Blair in a romantic infatuation with him, Mrs. Birdsong first warns Jennie indirectly. "No fame on earth is so exacting as a reputation for beauty. Even if you give up everything else for the sake of love, as I did, you are still a slave to fear. Fear of losing love. Fear of losing the power that won love so easily." Then when she comes upon George in the act of kissing Jennie, she kills him. This tragedy immediately sets in motion an elaborate pretense, sponsored by John Welch and General Archbald—that George had accidentally killed himself with his own gun; they are prepared to swear in court to this effect. The "sheltered life" might protect Mrs. Birdsong from the law, but not from her own pitiful tragedy.

The sheltered life has been responsible for this sordid episode. Jennie Blair has never been forced to face realities. She was nurtured in a youthful egotism according to which she could do anything without suffering the consequences. She thought she could keep Mrs. Birdsong as a friend at the same time she had a love affair with her friend's husband. Jennie tried to make life over according to her own fancies; romance seemed better to her than reality. "The farther she passed from experience, the more real her happiness was in her thoughts.... And it seemed to her lying back in the car...that a hopeless passion was far more romantic than the happy end of all the fiction she was permitted to read." She justifies her mother's

60 Ibid., 284.
61 Ibid., 224.
contention that she did not know the first thing about life.

General Archbald, on the other hand, at eighty knew that the world could not be fitted to human desires. "He represents the tragedy, wherever it appears, of the civilized man in a world that is not civilized.... His is an effort of one human being to stand between another and life." He had wanted to be a poet and was a lawyer; he had wanted to marry a woman he loved, and had married a girl he had "compromised" because the accident of a snowstorm had kept them out all night in a sleigh; he had wanted to be free after his wife's death, but the needs of the women of his family had demanded his pity. "For eighty-three years he had lived two lives.... What he had wanted, he had never had; what he had wished to do, he had never done." Yet, for him age had its compensations; it had released him from the tyranny of desire: "Age alone, he perceived, is capable of that final peace without victory which turns a conflict of desires into an impersonal spectacle." The old man had no illusions left, but he could not tear away the web of illusions about life that Jennie Blair had woven about herself. It took murder to wake her up; and even then she could only scream: "I didn't mean to do any harm." Birdsong had the perfect comment for her: "To be innocent at eighteen is a crime."

Miss Glasgow knows that it is a tragedy for people to see their fool's

62 A Certain Measure, 204.
63 The Sheltered Life, 152.
64 Ibid., 265.
paradise shattered. Jennie's world crashes; Mrs. Birdsong's does, too, for she had killed herself trying to live as an ideal for a man she ended by shooting to death. The Sheltered Life is more than the story of individuals losing the anchors to which they have clung. It carries broader implications, the destruction of a whole system of living. It is not only the Southern aristocrats who can no longer believe in a sterile religion, who have come to realize that unpleasant facts cannot be avoided by refusing to see them. It is not merely these aristocrats whose way of life is being gradually undermined by the materialism which, symbolized by a factory odor, is driving them out of their old homes and their leisurely, sheltered existence. When George Birdsong cries, "Are we to be driven out by a small,"

there is as much depth of significance as there is in Chekov's The Cherry Orchard in which the first sound of the ax laid to the trees and the snapping of a violin string are the signs of an old order's death. The whole American way of life is being threatened, Miss Glasgow seems to say; General Archbald is the only one in the book who realizes, even faintly what is happening. "In how many faces of men, women, children, and animals, all over the world, had he seen that look of the hunted reflected? A look of bewilderment, of doubt, of agony, of wondering despair; but most of all a look that is seeking some God who might, but does not, show mercy." 65 And again: "Though he did not suspect that his era was dying, he felt that both he and his age were drifting, not aimlessly like dust, but

65 Ibid., 142.
somewhere to an end." As Miss Glasgow explains her book in *A Certain Measure*, the "sheltered life" throughout the world, "of religion, convention, social prejudice, was at the crumbling point, just as was the case with the little human figures in the story."*

Seen from such a point of view, the comedies of manners, though written in a witty style, are not far from tragedy. The same theme of the disintegration of society and its values, we have seen, appeared in *The Vein of Iron*; and Miss Glasgow continues the same idea in *In This Our Life*, her last novel and Pulitzer Prize winner in 1941. Whereas *The Sheltered Life* dealt with the period just before the World War and *The Vein of Iron* ended during the depression, *In This Our Life* concerns the years just preceding the recent conflict. As a novel it raises two questions: whether character and integrity are worth the unhappiness they cause a woman who strives to be completely honest; and, secondly, whether life today is any improvement on what it was in slower, more gracious times.

The first question is answered through the characters of Roy Timberlake and Asa, her father. Though their desire for happiness is unfulfilled, both Roy and Asa, because they remain true to themselves and bear with courage the adversities that come their way from their own families, are not defeated because they do not surrender.

Asa Timberlake has lived to see the old houses torn down to make room for an industrial age. The ease and comfort of a former way of life, as re-

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66 Ibid., 378.

67 *A Certain Measure*, 205.
presented by the old homes, have yielded to the cramped and standardized conditions of homes built in city subdivisions. Beauty and order have bowed to ugliness. Like so many other characters in Ellen Glasgow's novels, Asa has never had the happiness he has always wanted. "For fifty-nine years... he had hungered from freedom. And he had never known what freedom was like. He had struggled against a conspiracy of tradition and of custom, of reason and of economics."68 The "conspiracy of family life" was symbolized by his wife, a woman he had married in a moment of infatuation; he discovered that he did not love her, did not even like her. In order to hold him and because she could not live realistically, his wife Lavinia had had recourse to chronic invalidism, and therefore bound Asa to her by ties of duty and pity. Lavinia was the typical weakling idealist; she had been "driven from one stronghold of faith to another. Sentiment had failed her; chivalry had failed her; feminine weakness and sex compulsion had alike failed her; and now it appeared that her last lonely refuge, hypochondria, was about to be undermined."69

A bequest to her had released Asa from the necessity of supporting her. He had learned to be happy only in the country and in Kate Oliver's company; Kate had a farm and dogs, and she was vigorous and understanding. With her, he lived his second life; for Asa was two individuals, the man who lived the life of circumstance, duty, and convention and the man who lived a secret

68 In This Our Life, New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1941, 42.
69 Ibid., 67.
and strong life within. 70 As soon as he had determined to live with Kate, however, the demands of family began to operate at once. For his second daughter, Stanley, a selfish egoist, rootless, amoral, had gotten into trouble. Driving her car at night at high speed, she had run into and killed a boy; at first, she tried to throw the blame on a young Negro, Parry, who sometimes drove the car as a chauffeur. But Asa, suspecting the truth and unwilling to see a sensitive and talented boy—even a Negro—suffer unjustly for his daughter's crime, forces her to confess. Her wealthy uncle's influence and her beauty and family solidarity protect Stanley from the consequences.

Behind the characters of Stanley and Roy Timberlake, several ideas develop. In the first place, Stanley is an egoist like Jennie Blair and Annabel Upchurch; she is a siren in a modern setting. What she wants she takes, no matter who suffers, because she thinks she has a right to be happy. Asa analyzes her and her kind as persons without standards. "None of them, Asa mused, has a design for living.... It isn't that they see themselves in the terms of their age, but that they see their age only in wider terms of themselves." 71 Her appetite demands Peter Kingsmill, Roy's husband, even though she herself is engaged to Craig Fleming. Though Stanley is willing to rely on family feeling to help her in her troubles, this feeling is not strong enough to prevent her from ruining Roy's happiness.

70 Ibid., 238.
71 Ibid., 338.
Stanley is a sign of the disintegration of the modern family. As Asa said to Roy: "The hardest thing for me to believe is that the family feeling no longer means anything, for better or worse. It has done harm enough, I know, but at least it held things together when the world rocked. Anyway, the family as a unit now seems to be only another habit that has played out."72 Stanley and Kingsmill elope and within a few months, Stanley drives him to suicide. Again the family come to the rescue.

Roy, the older daughter, is the new woman; like Dorinda Oakley, she faces the unhappiness of losing her husband with courage. She represents a contemporary generation cast loose from any supports, physical, intellectual, or spiritual, which might comfort her. She has only fortitude or a brittle bravery to sustain her. When Stanley has not only taken away her husband but has also taken away Roy's new fiance, Craig Fleming, her despair and heartbreak can find no comfort. If Fleming really loved Stanley, her situation might be tolerable; but Fleming confesses that he dislikes the girl who attracts him—he cannot resist Stanley because "she is in my blood, in my nerves." Love is seemingly always biological and not part of the will in Ellen Glasgow's stories; certainly, it is not realistic. When Asa tries to find some means to console Roy, he was at a loss what to say. "What power, what belief, could he invoke? Had we abolished both reason and morality, to fall back upon the raw mercies of biology? Was there nothing he could offer her, nothing, except that blind instinct for decency which man-

72 Ibid., 148.
kind had picked up and lost...between lower and upper levels of barbarism?"73 Roy herself feels adrift; her mother had God to turn to, and her father had at least the forms of morality. Her intellectual confusion and doubt find expression in ponderings like these:

There were fleeting instants when impulse would slip control, and a satirical voice in her mind ask: Did you love love, or did you love Peter? Is Craig merely a different image that love wears? Is love immortal, and does only the object of love change and vary? This year you love Craig, and last year you loved Peter, she thought, because I needed him with my whole nature. I love Craig because he has need of me. I love love because in the world we know it is the only reality left.74

"I was trying," Miss Glasgow wrote, "to reflect the disorders of a world without moorings."75 Roy and Asa had discovered that not even in that closest of all human relationships, the family, were moorings to be found. All had succumbed to material standards, of pleasure grasped at the moment. Asa expressed the tragedy of the old who saw their code of conduct "flatten and shrivel up as utterly as a balloon that is pricked.... The worst is to feel that the moral universe, the very foundation of all order, has trembled, has toppled over, has vanished."76 Roy is the new generation crying out in despair for something the spirit can hold to. On the last page of the book, she cries out to her father, "Oh, Daddy, I want something to hold

73 Ibid., 434.
74 Ibid., 260
75 A Certain Measure, 256.
76 In This Our Life, 53.
by! I want something good!" Her father can only answer her appeal with vagueness: "You will find it, my child. You will find what you are looking for. It is there, and you--if not I--will find it." In This Our Life, as one reviewer phrased it, is "really a study of the effects of the lack of religious faith on two American generations." Curiously, though Ellen Glasgow does not despair, we are never given solid reasons for not despairing. Money is not enough; religion, to her, is hollow; democracy has degenerated into a mass-mind slavery induced by a standardized, brutally ugly machine age. Humanity might be enough; but to her, though human beings are likeable, human nature is contemptible. Only the individual who possesses his own soul seems to have value. As Asa puts it, "I can't help harboring the absurd notion that there is a dignity attached to the state of man." Even so, the reason is conspicuously omitted. One critic has pointed out:

The unsatisfactory thing in Miss Glasgow's work is not, of course, that it makes much of character and personal relationships but that it comprehends hardly anything else.... Of those impersonal aspects of existence which alone give imaginative significance to the personal there is scarcely a trace.... Thus, despite all her skill and sympathy in analysis, Miss Glasgow seldom enlarges imagination in us. For one thing the intensity of her preoccupa-

77 Ibid., 467.
78 Edward Skillin, The Commonweal, XXXIII (March 28, 1941), 579.
79 In This Our Life, 187.
80 Ibid., 213.
tion with personal feeling comes very near the sentimental; most sentimental of all, perhaps, is her repeated emphasis that people can only help themselves in emotional difficulty, that salvation comes by one's own strength, that it is necessary to be hard and not sloppy.  

It is not entirely correct to say that Miss Glasgow ignores impersonal forces. It is true that she neglects God; for Him, she substitutes a belief in perfectibility based on evolution. For instance, Asa says, "Some day everything will be different. Life will be different, life will be happier, life will become what one wants, not what one fears."

In another place, Asa and Roy discuss duty and religion as sanctions. "I suppose they (these sanctions) had their uses. It takes a lot of experiment, doesn't it, to make evolution." At the same time, it is difficult to reconcile this belief in progress with her obvious dissatisfaction with contemporary mental and moral bewilderment and her nostalgia for the graciousness of the past—as she makes Asa Timberlake express it. For she herself, in her Richmond home, preserved the charming manners and the gracious traditions of the Old South as an oasis in the midst of a manufacturing desert. Her indictment of contemporary Southern fiction is sufficient revelation where her true sympathies lie.

One may admit that the Southern States have more than an equal share of degeneracy and deterioration; but the multitude of half-wits, and whole idiots, and numphomaniacs, and paranoids, and rakehells in general, that populate the modern literary South could flourish nowhere but in

81 The Times Literary Supplement (Saturday, November 8, 1941), 553.
82 In This Our Life, 331.
83 Ibid., 303.
the weird pages of melodrama. There is no harm in the fashion, one surmises, until it poses as realism. It may be magnificent, indeed, but it is not realism, and it is not peculiarly Southern.  

Enough has been said in the analysis of the comedies of manners to indicate that in them Miss Glasgow is still concerned with reality. She places the stress on character in situation, comical situations, it is true, but still realistic. Characters like General Archbald, Asa Timberlake, Roy Timberlake, Judge Honeywell, Eva Birdson, and Mrs. Bredalbane are among the most roundly developed and memorable in her novels. One point to be made about them is that they were not created directly from observation but are rather an artistic composite of many individuals; in other words, they are imaginative creations. Over and over she describes how her characters originated. "All the characters trooped in together, with every contour, every feature, every attitude, every gesture and expression, complete." She will later recognize some trick, some habit, of a character as belonging to someone she had known or heard of in the past. Judge Honeywell was a collective portrait of several Virginians of the old gentleman class. "Nothing was taken entirely from my acquaintances; it was a matter simply of contours blended and characteristics changed." This is the method of artistic or creative realism.

Nothing about motivation, heredity, environment, modern psychology, or any other elements of characterization need be mentioned here which has

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84 A Certain Measure, 89.
85 Ibid., 201.
86 Ibid., 215.
not been discussed in previous chapters. The factor of will receives prominence as before, but emotions still are credited with many of the decisions the characters make. Roy Timberlake, for instance, is aware that "life has taught her the bitter lesson that her will was independent, but her emotion could be too easily and too deeply involved."\textsuperscript{87} It seems contradictory to speak of an independent will and uncontrollable feelings. One of her critics, Miss N. Elizabeth Monroe, finds in Miss Glasgow's characters a fundamental distortion of morality. Miss Glasgow's characters, she says, act not from any moral struggle, although it is described in moral terms, but from habit or intuition or feeling. They act in conformity to a code of manners neither religious nor moral and almost without social meaning—or they rebel. But they do not act with free will. "Their actions are motivated by emotion and sensibility and not by thought."\textsuperscript{88} In another place, Miss Monroe says:

Paying deference to a moral conception of life in the development of characters through suffering, she never makes action in her novels turn on moral choice, confining herself in the main to a descriptive and ironical treatment of morals.... Tracing moods of men who have almost lost their power to act through divorcing meaning from action is as true to nature as moral struggle but cannot be made to seem as true through the logic of art. Moral struggle catapults a man into action with the command to extricate himself or go down to defeat. We see what moves a character to action and what he hopes to gain and are moved to pity when his acts rebound on him for resolution. The process enthralls the mind. Her stories merely tease the mind into interest through perfection of their art and the sharp outlines of futility.\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{87} \textit{In This Our Life}, 229.

\textsuperscript{88} Monroe, \textit{op. cit.}, 176.

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., 178.
Setting, too, in these novels is no longer a literal transcription. Ellen Glasgow throws off the restraints of formula and chooses details which suit her purpose. Her Queenborough is still recognizably Richmond, but it is other Southern cities as well. In early novels like The Romance of a Plain Man, she verified with exhaustive fidelity every detail. Her conscience forbade her to turn a maple into a mulberry tree. "But in The Romantic Comedians, I have not failed," she said, "whenever I have needed shade, to make two trees grow in my Queenborough where only one was planted before me in Richmond." 90 For comedy—and great fiction, for that matter—cannot be broken to the "pedestrian pace of facts." 91

Finally, the style, except in In This Our Life (which is unusually grave), is fitted to the mood. The Sheltered Life is "shot through with scents and colours; The Romantic Comedians, with rippling lights; and They Stooped to Folly with laughing animation." 92 Moreover, the pages sparkle with epigram and witty turns of phrase. A few samples selected at random from The Romantic Comedians and They Stooped to Folly are sufficiently illustrative. "The worst of all possible worlds would be one invented by good women." Where on earth could people know so little and yet know it so fluently?" A ball is "a dance of adulation before the consecrated idol of the Young Girl." "There was much to be said of the womanly woman. At least men felt safe with her." "Her firm brown skin...looked not so much

90 A Certain Measure, 213.

91 Ibid., 214.

92 Ibid., 184.
youthful in texture as impervious to age." "To reduce behaviour to a for-
mula, however wanton, appeared miraculously to invest it with the dignity
of a habitation and a name." Her friends testify that Ellen Glasgow's talk
was often "as crisply epigrammatic, as direct, as pungent as the talk of
the people in her novels."93

This chapter has dealt with Miss Glasgow's comedies of manners. Their
wit, satire, and irony have been directed at the foibles of the society
folk of Virginia; but it was not long before the satire lost its provincial-
ity and became a critical examination of life in America. The life pictured
was still Virginia's, but the implications of the picture became universal.
Not only was the culture of the Virginia gentlemen and ladies slowly dying,
but under the impact of a materialistic age, all the ideals of beauty, demo-
cracy, individualism, in America, together with the feeling of security
which life in a free country had developed, began to wither away. Miss
Glasgow pictured this decay as a confusion of spirit and of ways of life;
in place of a former spiritual, moral, and physical security, there came
amorality, rootlessness, an aching restlessness, and defeat. The only hope
she sees lies, not in some radical political or social revolution, but in
the stability of the individual, especially in his refusal to surrender to
the circumstances of life. Beyond this somewhat anchorless creed, she sees
neither philosophy nor what is more important, God and religion. Her real-
ism, in a word, has never probed far beneath the surface to the living
realities of the spiritual world, but has been almost as materialistic as
the crude industrial materialism she disliked so much.

93 Clark, op. cit., 67.
CONCLUSION

Ellen Glasgow was always the conscious artist. After almost a half century of writing, she was the author of just twenty books, among them a small volume of poems and a collection of short stories. So small an output argues laziness, a lack of inspiration, or the habits of careful workmanship. Her artistry and style, together with the information that she wrote every morning without fail until the last years when ill health prevented her, are sufficient arguments against her laziness. And she has admitted that never was she at a loss for a subject; she endeavored her life long to keep her creative faculties enriched by experience.¹

No one can say, of course, with certainty whether her work will endure. Whether it does or not, Ellen Glasgow has still made a valuable contribution to American letters. With her first books written between 1897 and 1915, she carried out an almost lone rebellion against the sentimentality in Southern fiction. She was an inquiring realist from the beginning, although her realism was at first diluted by the spirit of romance. Her literary realism was evident here in her choice of the common man as the subject of her novels; in her preoccupation with the contemporary sciences of biology and sociology in interpreting man; in the scrupulous documentation of her settings and her historical backgrounds; and in the creation of character from life. Yet even in these early books, she did not confine herself to a mere word by word transcription of what she observed; she transmuted the

¹ A Certain Measure, 208-210.
disordered facts of reality into the order and harmony of art.

Part of this order came from her guiding theme in all her books, though this theme, predominant in her early volumes, was subordinated to other themes as she matured as a writer. Her major theme was the struggle between the Old South aristocracy and the lower and middle class elements in society. She described the rise of men like Nick Burr, Ben Starr, and Gideon Vetch to financial and political power. She was also interested in the social upheavals in the rural districts, which saw land and influence pass from pre-war landowners to the sons of the poor. In every case, we watch these changes take place through the careers of carefully drawn individuals rather than class groups; moreover, these individuals are never historical personages but men and women of obscure stations in life. Her men and women are as valuable in themselves as they are for the social and political changes which they symbolize.

In books like Virginia and Barren Ground, Miss Glasgow stresses character rather than social history, and in doing so, she is pre-eminently the realist. Few Southern novelists before 1925 had built their novels about a conception of character which saw the individual in terms of a struggle against inward and outward circumstances. Miss Glasgow throughout thinks of her man and women as continually disillusioned by the realities of life; they find themselves in conflict with their own emotions and with impulses which betray them in love, and they struggle amid such things as dead convention, poverty, barren land, and the depression.

In her last books, Miss Glasgow becomes an ironical and critical realist. She sees her world of Virginia passing through a cultural and
moral transition. She welcomes the changes which liberate human beings from the chains of arbitrary conventions and from false optimism. Those who keep to the illusions of the past or those who refuse to fact the important realities of their time strike her as pathetic, but at the same time slightly ridiculous. So she gently satirizes the ideal of a lady, the pretensions of male superiority, the claims of a materialistic society.

But as Miss Glasgow welcomes some changes, she is disturbed by others. To her, life in America today is confused; men and women are culturally and morally adrift. When they threw off the shackles of old manners, they also discarded moral ideals. People no longer have a design for living; they have few principles which will serve them when trouble strikes them. Materialism, industrialism, the demand for sensation, the pursuit of a good time, selfishness (I have a right to happiness!), all these have contributed to the anarchy of contemporary society.

Although in her view the world is in a state of decay, Miss Glasgow remains optimistic. Individuals like Ada Fincarel and her father, General Archbald, Dorinda Oakley, Roy and Asa Timberlake—all who possess their souls, and who, through fortitude, resist all attempts to defeat them, are the hope of the future. In-evolution, too, she expects a gradual improvement in the world, although there may be regressions along the road to progress and civilization. Finally, as she says, philosophy and religion will help. "The mass of men will not be content to live entirely without religion or philosophy as a guide." 2

2 "What I Believe," The Nation, CXXXVI (April 12, 1933), 406.
Her methods of literary realism changed as she matured. Her early books concentrated on documentation of external facts. The novels of character became much more concerned with the data of psychological experience than with externals; landscape, depressions, war, and the like were merely incidentals to which character could react. And in her comedies of manners, her Queenborough is no longer a fictitious name for a real Virginia town whose details she reproduces exactly; it is an imaginative composite in which the facts are realistic but no longer photographic. This change in her art applied also to her characters, for they are almost completely products of the imagination and not, as formerly, based on individuals she had known personally. This last phase of her realism is artistic, and not documentary. "Hers was a formal art limited to the surface of life sustained and given perspective by the depth of the author's vision. This constitutes Ellen Glasgow's real greatness." In most of her work, Miss Glasgow reflects the thoughts and the fiction techniques of her time. Yet she has never been the darling of critics, nor has she received the popular acclaim of other realists of the South or of her time. Her habit was to work quietly at what she wanted to do, eager neither for popularity nor financial success. She was that extraordinary phenomenon in American literary life, an artist. "Only as a form of art has fiction ever concerned me."

3  A Certain Measure, 175.
4  Monroe, op. cit., 178.
5  A Certain Measure, 104.
It seems strange, then, that she has won little critical recognition. Histories of American literature dismiss her with a phrase or do not mention her at all; occasionally men like Carl Van Doren or A.H. Quinn give her several paragraphs. Henry S. Canby represents a group of her friends who look upon her as the first lady of American novelists.

I nominate her as our best contemporary master of the tragic drama of significant manners. I nominate her as our tenderest realist of men (men more than women), and our most clear-eyed ironist, for since she is ironic only of the men and women she likes and admires, she never mixes her irony with the stronger but cruder brew of satire.6

She has had inadequate critical estimation, Canby continues, in America because she belongs to the great classical tradition of the novel. Instead of writing tragedies about ignoble men and women crushed by an ignoble society, she has been stirred by the old and traditional tragedy of frustration—"the waste of life through maladjustment of man to environment and environment to its men. It is the poignant tragedy of nobility, cramped by prejudice, or of beauty gone wrong through inability to adjust to the real, or a good philosophy without premises in existing experience."7 Her greatest characters are those who find in the circumstances of their lives a challenge to what is largest in their natures; they have had the courage to defy social prejudice, they have had faith in democracy despite its crudities, and they have kept the vision characteristic of an earlier period in the history of Virginia. She was the first Southern novelist to write of the South as a

6 Henry S. Canby, The Saturday Review of Literature, XVIII (September 10, 1938), 3.

7 "Ellen Glasgow: Ironic Tragedian," The Saturday Review of Literature, XVIII (September 10, 1938), 14.
part of the "civilized world rather than as a lost province."8

These are some of her claims to distinction. Those who would place Miss Glasgow as only an excellent minor novelist, despite her human and dramatic matter, her significant themes, her stories of important social and historical movements, her understanding of life about her, and her story-telling ability, differ in their analysis of her faults. One says that her neglect as one of the first of the realistic school of Southern writers is explained by "her beautiful, rather than economical, style."9 Joseph Warren Beach accused her of lacking in "force, originality, and distinction," in comparison with Faulkner, Steinbeck, Wolfe, and other contemporaries.

I grow impatient with her formal characterization, her perpetual perfunctory landscapes, and above all her endless colorless records of what her characters think and feel on all occasions. It is mainly in these subjective passages, her penchant for brave cliches "dates" her at the same time that it ranks her somewhat below the best writers of either the ante-bellum, or the post-bellum period.10 Yet, this is merely a criticism of her techniques, and with much use, even the most original technique may become a cliche.

What about her presentation of Life? Joseph Collins asserted that she "has told the truth about life, as she observed it and encountered it";

9 Sare Haardt, "Ellen Glasgow and the South," The Bookman, LXIX (April, 1929), 139.
10 Joseph W. Beach, "American Letters Between Wars," College English, III (October, 1941), 5.
her tales are "human documents."

But Elizabeth Monroe feels that though Miss Glasgow provides us with an authentic imitation of life, it is "not deeply moving. Her vision is clear and authentic, but the passion and urgency of life are left out, except in Barren Ground, and her sympathy is not deep enough to celebrate the passing of an era." Although analyzing Miss Glasgow's work from another point of view, Donald Davidson agrees with this estimate. Like all Southern writers, he says, Miss Glasgow is torn between two motives. On the one hand, there is her sense of loyalty and tradition, her fidelity as an artist to her subject-matter; on the other, there is her temptation to criticize what she loves.

Beneath the veracious detail of her pictures of Virginia society, beneath the wit and pathos of her stories, lurks always a reproachful and disapproving voice. The faults of her characters are not such as belong to human beings merely; they are the faults of a southern society that she looks at with un-southern eyes and chastises even while she loves. She is torn between what her heart cleaves to and what her intellect has been persuaded to disapprove. Miss Glasgow has understood the weakness of the southern tradition more than its strength, and has often warped strength to look like weakness. The tragic spirit can not operate on material approached thus, for there are no tragedies of weakness merely.

Whether Ellen Glasgow is a great writer or not, or whether her strengths will be sufficient to counteract her weaknesses, no critic can perhaps decide. One or two of her books, however, will certainly live because of their humanity.

11 Joseph Collins, Taking the Literary Pulse, New York: Doran, 1924, 68.
12 Monroe, op. cit., 167.
It is difficult likewise to determine whether she has directly influenced any of her contemporaries among Southern writers. But it can hardly be gainsaid that without the example of her courage, books like Frances Newman's *The Hardboiled Virgin*, Julia Peterkin's *Scarlet Sister Mary*, or Mary Johnston's *Hagar*, might never have been written. Courage begets courage, and those readers in the South who tolerated the milder work of Ellen Glasgow were conditioned to tolerate the stronger meat of her successors. Today, with or without her encouragement, capable and outstanding work is being done by a group of younger writers led by Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, Frances Newman, Julia Peterkin, Paul Green, and others. Much of their work contains a realistic approach that would have received scant courtesy in the South when Ellen Glasgow began to write fifty years ago. Her work may not endure, but it is difficult to forget that she was a trailbreaker for an honest and realistic view of Southern life and that in the ripening of her art she had few peers among the women novelists of America.
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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Brother Lucius Michael Kump, F.S.C., has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

March 19, 1945

Date

James J. Young

Signature of Adviser