



## **Máster Interuniversitario en Estudos Ingleses Avanzados e as súas Aplicacións**

Traballo de  
fin de máster

From Virginia Ambler  
to Dorinda Oakley:  
A Comparative Study  
of Femininity Models  
in Ellen Glasgow's  
Novels

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# Folla de autorización

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## *The Call*

*Woman called to woman at the daybreak!  
When the bosom of the deep was stirred,  
In the gold of dawn and in the silence,  
Woman called to woman and was heard!*

*Steadfast as the dawning of the polestar,  
Secret as the fading of the breath;  
At the gate of Birth we stood together,  
Still together at the gate of Death.*

*Queen or slave or bond or free, we battled,  
Bartered not our faith for love or gold;  
Man we served, but in the hour of anguish  
Woman called to woman as of old.*

*Hidden at the heart of earth we waited,  
Watchful, patient, silent, secret, true;  
All the terrors of the chains that bound us  
Man has seen, but only woman knew!*

*Woman knew! Yea, still, and woman knoweth! —  
Thick the shadows of our prison lay —  
Yet that knowledge in our hearts we treasure  
Till the dawning of the perfect day.*

*Onward now as in the long, dim ages,  
Onward to the light where Freedom lies;  
Woman calls to woman to awaken!  
Woman calls to woman to arise!*

— Ellen Glasgow

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## INTRODUCTION

In my degree's final thesis I studied one of the later novels of Ellen Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life* (1932), which rendered masterfully the death of the mythic Old South. The character of Eva Birdsong left a lingering feeling of uneasiness, curiosity and many unanswered questions: were there others like her, or different; what had happened before, and after; through what steps did Glasgow come to her? This project is an attempt to answer some of these questions, to place Glasgow's heroines within a broader context of history, time, place and her own career, but also within Glasgow's concerns with gender which transcend the twentieth century, the South and her novels.

The reading that I propose in this study examines the role of Glasgow as a feminist writer and tries to contribute to the process of re-reading this author initiated by critics in the last decade of the past century and to remark her contribution to this movement. This author grew up with a divided heritage between the tradition of the Old South and the contemporary changes of the New South which resulted in her ambivalent attitude regarding topics such as race or even gender. However, in this study I argue that Glasgow sketches in her early phase two opposing models of femininity that are developed in her later works according to a transition from the conservative model of the southern lady to a more progressive one embodied in the new woman. In this manner the author would complete her initial project of revolt at two different levels: against women's oppression and against the tyranny of the sentimental novel in the South by providing a realistic portrait of women since the ante-bellum period to the beginning of the twentieth century.

The corpus selected is formed by three novels that belong to different stages of Glasgow's production, covering three decades. *The Battle-Ground*, one of the author's early novels, was published in 1902 and here she introduces two opposing models of

femininity through the Ambler sisters. The exploration of their development as well as their outcome in the story will result in the outline of future models of womanhood. *Virginia* (1913), the second of the novels studied, has consolidated as one of the major studies of the southern lady. The last one, *Barren Ground* (1925), is Glasgow's most acclaimed and studied work. The election of this third novel as part of the corpus intends to link the new type of woman depicted here with the previous antecedents both in terms of similarity and difference thus highlighting the evolution of the author.

This study has as its main objectives, first the revision of the general historical setting that prompted the emergence and the construction of these models of femininity, comparing the general American context with the particular situation of the South. Second, proposing a gender-informed critical analysis of the female protagonists and other relevant female characters that fall within the aforementioned types. Third, connecting the construction of these different femininity models with Glasgow's evolution in generic terms. This exploration is carried out in three chapters whose contents are distributed according to a principle of historical progression. The first one introduces the author and her contributions to feminism outside fiction. The second one explores the construction of the southern lady and provides the analysis of the first two novels. The final one deals with the emergence of the new woman in America and in the South as it develops the analysis of the last novel.

In order to fulfil this purpose I have adopted a gender perspective and I will be examining some of its key concepts such as motherhood and mother-daughter relations, body and sexuality, marriage and the nuclear family or women's bonding and how they interact with female's self-development. So as to successfully carry out this project I will rely on two kinds of secondary sources: the extensive literature on Glasgow's novels, and different treatises and articles concerned with gender and women's studies.

## 1: "A REVOLT FROM THE PRETENSE OF BEING": ELLEN GLASGOW ON GENDER

Ellen Glasgow was born in 1873 and died in 1945 in Richmond, Virginia, the former capital of the Confederacy. She belonged to a relatively affluent family that, after the hardships of war, managed to join the prosperities of the New South. Her mother was the traditional southern lady and the person to whom Glasgow was closest. On the contrary, the relation with her father, a strict Presbyterian, was never in favourable terms. In fact, she defined him as "more patriarchal than paternal" (*Woman* 87) and a kind provider of anything except love (*Woman* 15).

This "conflict of types" (Jones, *Tomorrow* 226) will be translated as one of the major ambiguities traceable in Glasgow's thought and writing. From the beginning of her career she opposed the sentimental view of the South that had been displayed in the romances of authors such as Thomas Nelson Page. She despised that world of illusion and pretense that was deeply rooted in the South and which she termed "evasive idealism" and attacked for its deplorable effects, since "it made people insensitive [...] blind to what happened" (Glasgow, *Woman* 104). Therefore, her writing will be aimed at reassessing the past and contesting a present dominated by the myth of the Lost Cause. She defended that what the South needed most was blood, "because Southern culture had strained too far away from its roots in the earth; it had grown thin and pale; it was satisfied to exist on borrowed ideas, to copy instead of create", and irony which "is an indispensable ingredient of the critical vision; it is the safest antidote to sentimental decay" (Glasgow, *Measure* 28). However, she only succeeded partially; like many other southern authors, she could not stray too far away from her home to look for inspiration as Virginia gave her "the essence of time and place" (Glasgow, *Woman* 195). Moreover, in the works to be discussed we find some remnants of the romantic

idealization of young age or the reverence for the past in the twilight of an age which is forever gone.

Another of the ambiguities in which Glasgow was always caught was that dichotomy between the local and the universal.<sup>1</sup> She claimed that she would write “as no Southerner had ever written of the universal human chords beneath the superficial variations of scene and character” (*Woman* 98). Criticism was for a long time polarized on her consideration as a local writer or a universal one. In this study I will show that some of the central concerns of her work, such as those of gender, make no use of such distinction, for the conditions of oppression of these women in the South, while retaining particular characteristics of their historical circumstances, have much in common with those of women in the rest of the US and Europe at the turn and for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Glasgow’s commitment to southern art was constant throughout her life and, in fact, from her sprung the idea of what was to become the First Annual Southern Writers Conference that took place on the 23<sup>rd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> of October in 1931. Glasgow herself was in charge of the opening of this gathering, an occasion she did not miss to point out the lack of female writers present, herself being the only one. Furthermore, she played an essential role in the Southern Revival (Becker 303) and is considered a pioneer (MacDonald 264) and one of the early key figures of the Southern Renaissance. Her prolific career (comprising twenty novels, a collection of short stories, another of essays and a posthumously published autobiography as well as some poems) was recognized nationwide when in 1932 she became one of the first women in the American Academy for Arts and Letters and in 1942 she received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

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<sup>1</sup> Among those who understand Glasgow’s work in a local sense we can mention E. Stanly Goldbold Jr., who highlights her role as a historian (15). This concern with the social history of Virginia is also emphasized by C. Hugh Holman (17) who delved more extensively into the fiction of Glasgow as a modern writer. (See also Rainwater (1996) for the modernist traces of her writing).

As Susan Goodman contends, in spite of the fact that some later authors have overlooked her influence, for the most part Glasgow's works have always provided a rich discussion that developed from multiple angles (*Biography* 2). The theoretical frame adopted in this project is that of gender studies and for this reason it is an imperative to delve in more depth firstly into the reflections that Glasgow herself made on gender-related questions and, secondly, into the critical reception of her works in these terms up to the moment. As it has already been discussed, everything surrounding Ellen Glasgow seems to move in ambiguities and the issue of gender does not escape these tensions. Analysing both her fictional and non-fictional writings, we can easily identify a clear concern with the situation of women in the past and the present. However, when it comes to the close analysis of her reflections and the relationship between her words and actions there seem to be some slight dissonances.

One of the central issues regarding Glasgow's feminist activism has to do with her involvement in the suffragist movement. In an interview of 1909 she talked about her sympathy with the cause and her absolute faith in their final achievement based on the fact that the quest was righteous and a sign of the progress, "an obedience in the laws of growth" (Glasgow, "Suffrage" 15-18; "Reason" 24). She put special emphasis on the right of southern women to vote, who, according to her, were probably "more fitted to the ballot than any other American women" (Glasgow, "Reason" 22). The reason was that the division of spheres that affected the traditional Victorian society applied differently in the South, since the women of the ante-bellum period and the Reconstruction had to face other challenges. The former "had really an enormous responsibility in the management of their own household;" and the latter were absolutely "unprepared" to face the change of times that rendered their traditional feminine virtues useless for the new historical era (Glasgow, "Reason" 23).

After meeting some feminist intellectuals such as Beatrice Harraden and May Sinclair and taking part in some of the suffragist marches with historical leaders like Emmeline Pankhurst or Lady Constance Lytton in England, Glasgow, together with her sister, Cary McComark, brought these ideas to their native Richmond (Peaslee 59).<sup>2</sup> In 1909 they arranged a public meeting with Laura Clay, a suffragist from Kentucky, thus introducing the highest spheres of the Tidewater aristocracy to the new movement. In the same year, they created the Equal Suffrage League of Virginia, which was to be affiliated with the National American Women Suffrage Association (Peaslee 59). Furthermore, Glasgow was friends with other female authors concerned with these issues such as Mary Johnston, with whom she kept a regular correspondence. However, around 1911 Glasgow began to drift away from the movement. In her autobiography she explains that this was mainly related to the illness and death of her sister Cary. She still believed that the vote should be seen as a right, and not a privilege in a democratic country, but she was no longer willing to “burn with a heroic gaze for the watchword of liberty” (Glasgow, *Woman* 187).

Although Glasgow’s suffragist activism was not very long lasting, throughout her life she continued to reflect on matters of gender and on a growing awareness of the situation of women which she described as “the beauty and the glory of our century” (Glasgow, “Reason” 23). In 1913, the same year of the publication of *Virginia*, Ellen Glasgow wrote for the *New York Times Book Review* a concise but powerful essay entitled “Feminism.” Here she explained that she understood the women’s movement as “a revolt from a pretense of being— it is at its best and worst a struggle for the liberation of personality.” (Glasgow, “Feminism ” 31-32). The feminist movement, therefore,

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<sup>2</sup> Before this, the women’s associations present in Virginia were the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution, the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America and the (in)famous United Daughters of the Confederacy. The single time Mary-Cooke Branch Munford tried to introduce a political topic in their gatherings, she was silenced by the rest of the women (Peaslee 58).

seems of great appeal to Glasgow since it combines two central elements that remain constant in her work and in her essays: the fight against illusion and pretense and the empowerment of those who had been victims of such a crippling system.

She uses her field of expertise, literature, to denounce that women had always been reduced to an artificial set of ideals and myths created by men, and within literature by male novelists. Literature provided a model based on the Victorian ideals of femininity, which, in her analogy, become a number of pre-fixed ingredients for the creation of a woman to the taste of men. Thus, the most common representation of the “womanly woman” is as one who possesses “modesty, goodness, self-sacrifice, an inordinate capacity for forgiveness [...] [and] a little vivacity –all sufficiently diluted to make the mixture palatable to the opposite sex” (Glasgow, “Feminism” 27). Such conception established a profound abyss between men and women: while the first stood for progress and advancement, the latter came to embody stagnation; the first “a human being,” the second “a piece of faintly colored waxwork” (Glasgow, “Feminism” 29).

The danger that Glasgow points out and that had been extensively discussed by the early feminists is the fact that women accepted such depictions thus contributing to the progressive transformation of a cultural attitude into a matter of nature or biology. In this closed system women have only two options: they are either content with their function as spectators or “hunted to [their] destruction” (Glasgow, “Feminism” 28). These alternatives are mirrored in literature through the creation of two opposing female myths that annihilate the complexity of female characters in fiction and of women in real life: the myth of the woman as an inspiration and the myth of the woman as an impediment. The first represents the ideal, and therefore occupies a safe and honoured position that Glasgow understands as more “the reflection of a man’s sentiment than [...] an analysis of a woman’s mind” and therefore provides the creator with a female

image to worship (Glasgow, "Myths" 38-9). The second reverses the situation when the female becomes the destroyer of the masculine dreams (Glasgow, "Myths" 43).<sup>3</sup> This narrow vision, originated from the basic axiom that women's existence is devoted to men, only allows a richness of characters in the old, ugly and wicked women. This shows that in fiction, and in reality, women are only allowed to have a life of their own when they are no longer used as the famous magnifying looking glass discussed by Virginia Woolf (29): "When they [women] cease to be valued as witnesses of the achievements of others, they display an amazing activity" (Glasgow, "Feminism" 29). Therefore, Glasgow advocated for the pressing need of breaking away from these myths and presenting women in a realistic manner that portrays their complexity. Although sometimes she falls into the fallacy of women's solemnity and sensitiveness, she aligns with Catherine Gasquoine Hartley (Mrs. Gallichan) when she advises against the consideration of women as morally superior and advances some of the concerns of masculinity studies when highlighting the situation of men also as victims of the social structure based on a rigid gender-based division of roles and characteristics (Glasgow, "Feminism" 33-34).

Glasgow's stance with regards to the first steps for the liberation of women is similar to that of her contemporaries. A reader of Woolf, she sides with Gallichan in the latter's claim that "that from which woman must be freed is herself— that unsocial self that has been created by a restricted environment" (qtd. in Glasgow, "Feminism" 34). Glasgow is aware that this view challenges the previous conception of women and for her society is seen as an affront to the natural; nonetheless, she also believes that changing this perception can only be achieved by taking action and stirring the *status quo*. As she

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<sup>3</sup> Glasgow introduces this topic in an essay entitled "Some Literary Myths" (1928). As an example of the myth of woman as an inspiration, she mentions Clarissa from Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa or the History of a Young Lady* (1747-48). She instantiates the myth of woman as an impediment with the character of Iris Storm from the novel *The Green Hat* (1924) by the American-born English writer Michael Arlen.

claims: “this hunger for freedom that is driving women to-day into strange countries, as it drove the pioneers of old across oceans to the wilderness of new continents, is bound up with the imperative striving of life.” (Glasgow, “Feminism” 36).

At the same time, Glasgow also emphasizes the imperative of cooperation for the thriving of the women’s movement: “the point of value is that we have realised our plight and have set ourselves to abolish it, and that we have stumbled on the important truth that co-operation is strength” (Glasgow, “Reason” 25).<sup>4</sup> When thinking about the situation of women in the South she is “fairly horror-stricken at the loneliness and depression they must have endured” (*Doubts* 24). Their only aim was to become a wife and mother and, once their duties were fulfilled in their youths, they withered until their death. For Glasgow, what they lacked was organization and this must be in her time a priority in order to achieve any fruitful change.

Modern criticism has dealt, at least to a certain extent, with Glasgow’s work from a feminist perspective and their contributions are as varied as the critics placed under this umbrella. A full apprehension of the extent to which ambiguities were rooted in Glasgow is not attainable without considering first her position as a woman writer in the South. Pamela Matthews, one of the most important feminist critics of the author, points out the life-long concern of Glasgow with the models of femininity that were available to her as “a white, upper-middle class, Southern woman” (“Womahood” 35).

So far we have just hinted at the situation of women in the South, and an extensive examination of this matter will be attempted as we turn to the discussion of the three novels. For now it suffices to say that the southern society in which Glasgow was born was based on all the elements that she criticised in her essays and interviews: the cult of a Victorian ideal of femininity and the strict division of spheres derived from it. This

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<sup>4</sup> One of the pieces that is part of Glasgow’s scarce poetic production, “The Call”, published in 1912, has as its subject matter women’s bonding.

social pressure affected especially those who did not fit into the standards or did not fulfil the expectations of their gender, in her case being a female writer in a scenario dominated by men. Anne Goodwyn Jones explains this brilliantly, showing the expectations placed over someone like Glasgow:

Born to become a southern lady, the southern woman who writes has been taught that emotion, not thought, is feminine; that regional patriotism, not universalism, is moral; that passivity, not active assertion, is ladylike; and that she should sacrifice her subjective self to uphold tradition. Most of all, she has been taught by southern tradition that she, as a southern lady, is its finest flower: thus to attack tradition is suicidal. (*Tomorrow* 238)

This produced a “split female self” torn between the private sphere, for which she was educated, and the public, where her professional expectations had placed her (Matthews, *Traditions* 13). Not only this would affect her, but also the division between the much coveted critical acceptance, that implied “inhabiting a male literary world” and the rebellion against such world (Matthews, *Traditions* 13). In her autobiography, which Lucinda MacKethan defined as a “quest for the writer’s identity” (“Daughter” 42), Glasgow ponders on the strength that writing gave her, as a “dark stream of identity, stronger and deeper and more relentless than the external movement of living” (*Woman* 41). However, when confronting the external world she suffered personally an attempted harassment and, later, the kind advice of a publisher to “go back to the South and have some babies” (*Woman* 108).

Taking all the aforementioned into consideration, the ambiguity and tensions present in Glasgow’s words and work, do not seem surprising. In fact, Monique Parent Frazee defines her as “rebellious in spirit but nonetheless conventional in conduct” (168). Indeed, she expresses her view from a moderate stance and avoids any kind of radical

feminist activism. Jones, in fact, labels her non-fictional contributions as “half-committed feminism” (*Tomorrow* 232). However, both critics and many others agree on the fact that it is in fiction that she excels in the treatment of such issues, and her feminist agenda is shown as “thorough and consistent” reaching the extent of imbuing her fiction with contemporary gender concerns (235). Frazee explains that her aversion to violence led her to choose “more subdued means of actions: moderate, disciplined, gentle; yet, under her velvet glove, one feels the iron hand of conviction, the cutting edge of her wit and satire” (187). In this respect, Edward Mims concludes that in spite of her moderate views on political rights, Glasgow has provided in her novels “abundant evidence” of the right of women “to live their own lives with a certain individuality and fullness, of the necessity to find expression for their inmost souls outside the relation of sex or marriage” and “of their ability to profit by the advance of modern life and thought” (500).

This essay concurs with the reading of Glasgow as a feminist writer that has been settled more recently through the studies of Pamela Matthews (1994) or Judy Cornes (2015). In spite of the possible ambivalence, the life she led in her time was unconventional, as Linda Wagner claims: “Ellen Glasgow managed to exist within the cultural and literary confines of her age, and yet to live and write as she wanted” (*Beyond* 3). She rebelled against two fundamental patriarchal authorities and pillars of southern culture: her father and religion (Frazee 180), when she could no longer believe in a God that allowed the cruelty of the world and consequently refused to attend church service with her father and sister. Glasgow defied likewise the scarce prospects of the upper-class southern women: she never felt attracted to maternity and always knew that marriage was not for her. In spite of being engaged she never married, and she wrote about the breaking of the engagement: “I was free from chains. I belonged to myself”

(*Woman* 245). This comment is of great interest since it foregrounds the mental and intellectual independence as a source of knowledge and strength, one of the central concerns in Glasgow's life: "Always I have had to learn from myself, from within. [...] Only a hunger and thirst for knowledge can bring perseverance" (*Woman* 41). For Frazee, her final emancipation came with her novels: "She completed her intellectual liberation by writing exactly what she wanted to write, without sparing her people, her times, the South or the opinions of gentility" (180).

Glasgow demanded the "right to be heard" (*Woman* 110) and she did it best through her writing. She sometimes referred to her literary work as "literature of revolt", and, as pointed out before, it is here where we will be able to best witness this rebellion against the patriarchal standards of her period. In most of her works she chose southern women and their tragic fate as a subject matter. As her friend and fellow writer, James Branch Cabell, observed of the Glasgow's novels, "what remains in memory is the depiction of one or another woman whose life was controlled and trammelled and distorted, if not actually wrecked, by the amenities and the higher ideals of Southern civilization" (qtd. in Gray 82). Beyond the powerful rendering of the lives of women and the strong criticism hidden in her acute irony, there are other aspects of Glasgow's works that have been pointed out from a feminist perspective such as the issue of women's interdependence, especially in what concerns the mother-daughter relations and the topic of motherhood. All of these and many other related issues would be dealt with in greater depth in the following chapters in relation to the three novels proposed.

## 2: PORTRAYING THE SOUTHERN LADY: *THE BATTLE GROUND AND VIRGINIA*

The South of the United States preserves, even to the present day, a distinctiveness within the nation. This has been forged since the original settlements and acquired its peak during the ante-bellum period. The institution of slavery was an essential defining factor of this difference. As it influenced the social body, it also shared a central role in the construction of gender and the definition of gender relations that affected both slaveholding and slave women.

Although the southern women of the nineteenth century shared with their Northern and European counterparts their disadvantaged position in a patriarchal society, their situation presented an unavoidable difference. Contrary to the division of spheres present in the North, the plantation structure posed the household as the centre of production and reproduction. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues that this reinforces gender constraints by enlarging the dominant position of men in the domain which was increasingly becoming the women's: the home (39). Aside from the traditional marital and maternal demands of its women, it is, therefore, necessary to add the care for the slaves and, if not the direct production, at least the supervision of necessary goods for a self-sufficient consumption (Fox-Genovese 109).

The complex and unequal social relationships displayed in this society settled around a number of fixed mythical images concerning the community's past and its members. The southern lady is one of these perennial images that became a basic pillar on which the sentimentalised South was settled. This figure has extensively been studied but it continues to provide a fruitful discussion since it connects gender concerns with those of race and class. Inspired by the Victorian ideals and the codes of medieval chivalry (Scott 15), the myth of the southern lady depicted "not a human being" but "a marble statue, beautiful and silent, eternally inspiring and eternally still" (Jones, *Tomorrow* 4).

Before becoming a lady, the white upper-class woman made her entrance in society as a belle. At this stage she presented a number of characteristics (flirtatious, impulsive or mischievous) that should disappear as she became engaged, in favour of acquiring others such as self-sacrifice and calm self-possession (Manning 95). As a lady she embodied the ideals of perfection and submission (Scott 7) and among her most important duties ranked “satisfying her husband, raising his children, meeting the demands of the family’s social position, and sustaining the ideals of the South” (Jones, “Belles” 42). The lady also represented “the moral centre of the household: pious, self-effacing and kind” (Scura, “Lady” 413). The southern lady became a symbol of the South itself, and thus her moral duty was elevated to the safeguard of her society (Clinton 95). Catherine Clinton points out that, in their position as definers, the males crafted these images “as an unconscious counterpoint to their own option of rowdy debauchery” (87). Thus, these women were totally deprived of any earthly affection, so far up in the pedestal that they could never step down.

Jones argues that one of the most plausible reasons behind the creation of this myth is the consolidation of the Western patriarchal tradition that had been using wives as symbols denoting the husband’s social position and wealth (*Tomorrow* 12). However, taking into consideration the particulars of the southern social body, another argument acquires relevance: since the southern lady represents the idea of religious, moral, sexual, racial and social perfection and is only inferior to men, she becomes a symbol of white male supremacy and it is used to “justify the perpetuation of the hegemony of the male sex, the upper and middle classes, and the white race” (Jones, *Tomorrow* 9-10). Thus, these women were placed at a crossroads where gender, race and identity become central: they belonged to a society where they were superior by virtue of their race but inferior in terms of gender. Any sympathy they could have felt for the slaves

disappeared as they became their oppressors; they were the victims of the white men but they thought to share more with them than with the women of the North who were battling against other conflicts in a different type of society (Jones, *Tomorrow* 25).

The predestination of these women to domesticity prevented them from acquiring a superior education. Their options were reduced to the extreme, especially taking into consideration that any deviation from the established norm would erase the love and respect with which seemingly “good ladies” were rewarded (Scott 20-1). The state and the church, as the most relevant social agents, subscribed the prevalent male dominance (Fox-Genovese 44). Likewise, instruction in academies, the church sermons and the literature of the period contributed to the dissemination of gender conventions at the same time that they provided slaveholders with a sense of identity and a mission (Fox-Genovese 196).

The image of the southern lady, therefore, constituted first and foremost an illusion, the central one on which the Old South was based. Upper-class women were reared with this myth sustained by their families and acquaintances so this made their clash with the reality of married and plantation life most dramatic. Anne Firor Scott in her seminal work on the southern lady explains that, although women stood by this model in public, the conflict between the life they had lived as belles and their new “matronly responsibilities” appeared in their private writings over and over (27). Clinton echoes how this artificial image did not reflect the true life that women were forced to lead:

The Southern lady was a symbol of gentility and refinement for plantation culture, designed to fill the requirements of chauvinist stereotype by embracing those qualities slaveowners wished to promote, even though the practical needs of plantation life cast her in quite a different role. The clash of myth and reality was monumental. (17)

According to the gender division that operated in the plantation household, women were in charge of three essential tasks: family life, children and household duties. The first became the central aspect in a woman's life (Scott 26). The third one encompassed from the most material needs such as food and clothes to those related with health and spirit, both within the white family and also within the slave community (Clinton 18).

Women were virtually confined to the domestic circle and their only solace was religion (Scott 42-43). Their protests were found to be mainly in connection to their relationship with slaves (concerns related to marriage, family life and sexual mores) and their deprivation of education (Scott 46). This last aspect acquires especial relevance if we take into consideration their total dependence on their husbands also in material terms. The skills they had were reserved for the home, and the lack of any further professional training left them without any money of their own. Although this was one of the central preoccupations in first wave feminism, many of these women did not openly advocate for economic independence (Scott 77).

In the configuration of the model of femininity of the lady the issues of class and race are central. As Fox-Genovese explains, “[w]omen, like men, assumed the place dictated by their gender, as defined by their society and modified by their race and class” (109). As it has already been indicated, the ideal applied to the women of the upper-classes whose lives differed greatly from those of lower class. While the former were supposed to supervise all the domestic chores, they were exempted from work on the field, unlike the wives of farmers (Scott 30). Although the poor white woman could be in disadvantage with regards to the mistress, the worst part was undertaken by the black female slaves. For the latter gender roles did not apply, they did not act as wives and mothers of their own children, the house chores they carried out they did as servants, and they developed the same heavy work that their male counterparts (Fox-

Genovese 192). To this it must be added that they often suffered the sexual advances of their masters who saw them as the animalistic and instinctive opposite to their morally strict wives (González Groba, "Introducción" 20). Therefore, the rigid codes of gender conventions could be violated in the case of black women as long as it was for the benefit and satisfaction of their white masters (Fox-Genovese 193). The endurance of hard work and physical violation as well as the deprivation of conventional female roles and gender relations had an impact on the black women's relations with their male counterparts and on their identity as women since "violations of the norm painfully reminded slaves that they did not enjoy the full status of their gender" (Fox- Genovese 193-94).

In spite of the artificiality, the dissonances between the theory and the reality and of being a minority, the myth of the southern lady was deeply rooted in the society even after the Civil War. As Fox-Genovese explains, all these factors "challeng[e] any easy assumptions about the relation between the ideal and reality but do not undermine the power of the ideal" (47). As we will see in the second chapter, the movement towards a new model of femininity would be slow and arduous.

### *THE BATTLE GROUND: OPPOSING MODELS OF FEMININITY*

*The Battle-Ground*, published in 1902, was the fourth novel of Ellen Glasgow and her first commercial success. In this work she starts displaying some of her favourite themes such as the evolving status of women (Goodman, "Introduction" vii-viii). In fact, as she explains in the preface, the novel is a good example of what could be termed impressionistic realism, since her deeply informed text emerges from "impressions, rather than facts" (*Measure* 21). This novel is the only one that features the Civil War and Glasgow presents this event in opposition to dominant models of the Lost Cause tradition that "had added fuel to a slowly kindling fire of revolt" in the author (Glasgow,

*Measure* 11). She opts for providing a faithful rendering of this historical event that does not compromise fidelity to fact (Scura, “Richmond” 22) but where the elegiac and sentimental tone disappears (McDonald 267). Instead, she provides a comprehensive view of the social involvement in the conflict as well as the “small decencies” that bring the people together independently of their class or geographical background (Goodman, “Introduction” xix).<sup>5</sup> In this sense, although the author detected in this work some of the traces of the romantic idealism of her youth (Glasgow, *Measure* 5) she also regards it as the first step in her crusade against evasive idealism (Glasgow, *Measure* 11).

The plot of the novel covers from 1850 to 1865 and focuses on the lives of two accommodated families, the Amblers and the Lightfoots, from Virginia and how their lives are affected by the secession. The Civil War (1861-1865) was a turning point in the history of the United States especially for the South. In the whole conflict gender played an essential role since while the North defended that they were fighting for slaves, the South claimed that they were fighting for their women. LeAnn Whites explains that “gender roles and gender relations played a critical role in the initial outbreak of the war, as well as in its course, its conduct, and its eventual outcome in the ‘reconstruction’ of the South” (3). From their perspective, the argument was not wrong, for we have seen that their women were turned into a paragon of the community’s mores and beliefs. For the flesh-and-blood women the war prompted a crisis in their lives (Whites 3). Scott explains that the response of women varied: there were some who evaded the situation leaving or trying to continue their happy lives as long as it was possible, and others who faced the events with different degrees of success depending on their personal circumstances (88).

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<sup>5</sup> The issues related to social class and distribution in the South are better seen through the character of Pinetop, a fellow illiterate and non-slaveholding soldier with whom Dan becomes friends during the time in the front (see Wright 31-2 and Gardner 148).

Likewise, the women of this novel, and of Glasgow's fiction at large, fall into two categories: active doers, like Betty and, to a lesser extent, her mother, or passive receivers, like Virginia and Molly Lightfoot (Scura, "Early Novels" 18; 22). In spite of the varying reactions, the women from this novel are directly affected by the war, because they have to face the Northern army and also because the patriarchal heads of their families are connected to politics. Major Lightfoot is an elder man who supports slavery and with his reactionary character favours the confrontation with the North as means to preserve their identity. By opposition, Governor Ambler is a firm defender of the Union but ultimately is forced to give up his ideas in order to save his home. As Frederick McDowell claims, he comes to represent "the soul of the South as often tragically torn between instinctive knowledge of moral truth and the immediate need to temporize with that truth in the interests of self-preservation" (63).

Glasgow, however, centres her novel on the opposite characters of the two Ambler sisters: Virginia and Betty. The opening already signals the unconventionality of Betty with her red hair, vitality and lack of interest in boys. Glasgow intended her to "personify the spirit that fought with gallantry and gaiety, and that in defeat remained undefeated" (*Measure* 5). Indeed, at a very young age Betty possesses many of the qualities that will mature during the war and turn her into a woman with "character, intelligence and strength" (González Groba, "Ashes" 34). She seems to combine some traditional masculine characteristics and others from her mother, which make her superior to both, the men who surround her and her own mother (González Groba, "Ashes" 35). Julia Ambler is an interesting and deeply contradictory character. She is more aware of race and gender oppression than the rest of the characters; for instance, she wants her slaves free when she dies and she notices very soon those traits of Betty that are different and, in fact, she pities her saying "Poor little firebrand. [...] How the

world will hurt you!” (Glasgow, *Battle* 25). Nonetheless, she acts as the uncritical transmitter of the value of female inferiority to her daughters (MacKethan, “Design” 95). This take root in Virginia who is described as “the delicate creature,” “flower” of the South (Glasgow, *Battle* 4), the prototype who physically and in her character fulfils the requirements of the southern lady. As Constante González Groba says, “Virginia conforms to a classic, romantic model of beauty, and she unquestioningly accepts the myths of submissiveness and self-sacrifice which in fact prevent her from developing an independent selfhood.” (“Ashes” 31). Under the male gaze she becomes no more than a pretty ornament: “Virginia, in rose pink, flitted up the crooked stair and across the white panels of the parlor” (Glasgow, *Battle* 137). She is compared to Aunt Emmeline whose portrait becomes an essential symbol in the novel. The pitiful remarks that Dan makes about this woman function as an anticipation of Virginia’s fate as another “poor beauty” to the interminable collection.

As the story progresses, the lives of these two sisters become increasingly different. Virginia, following the model of the upper-class white women, marries Jack Morson while Betty, who has fallen deeply in love with Dan Montjoy, remains faithful to him and to her character. Although she loves Dan truly and deeply there is not in her feelings an irrational subordination to the male desire but the loyalty of a friendship; in fact, she informs him “I can’t always kneel to you” (Glasgow, *Battle* 194). In this sense, Dan also constitutes an unusual character. He makes the most of the opportunity his grandparents grant him to gain an education however; unlike Oliver in *Virginia*, when he places his actions before his position he goes through with the consequences and joins the army as part of the lowest rank. In this sense, Dan is more advanced than Oliver for he chooses Betty over “the pretty simpleton” of Virginia much earlier (Glasgow, *Battle* 163).

When the situation is no longer sustainable and the war breaks out, the Governor and Dan become part of the Confederate army: the former as a colonel and the latter as an infantryman in the company of Big Abel, the faithful black slave.<sup>6</sup> The most prominent figure for the remainder of the story is undoubtedly Betty who, according to Scura, steals the protagonism from the male hero (“Early Novels” 20). This is also shown through the narrative’s focalisation which progressively becomes more centred on Betty relapsing occasionally to Dan to provide a more direct perspective of the battle. She rebels against the “folded hands and the terrible patience which are the woman’s share of a war” (Glasgow, *Battle* 163). Throughout the four years of war Betty takes care of her family and the Lightfoot’s place relentlessly. She represents the successful attempt of those women who took care of their homes and even moved outside their limited spaces in order to nurse or take the jobs that were left vacant for the lack of men.

In blatant opposition to Betty stands her sister Virginia. Pregnant, she follows her husband to the city where she is confronted with the disasters of war in hospitals. After hearing the news of Jack being injured she looks for him and that constitutes her last sacrifice: the same night both her and her child die. Virginia was part of the “expiring order” (Goodman, “Introduction” xxiv) so her death and miscarriage could only represent the death of the southern lady: “Her death is symbolic of the passage into oblivion of the values inherited from previous generations which cannot possibly survive the war” (González Groba, “Ashes” 32). This idea is reinforced by one of the many symbols that are present in the novel: the pervasive smell of the magnolia associated to the myth of the Old South but which in this case sickens and intoxicates

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<sup>6</sup> The treatment of black characters in the novel is generally believed to be ambivalent. Wright defends that Glasgow subtly criticizes the slaveholding society showing the great dependency of whites on blacks (28) but at the same time continues to give the merits of the efforts of blacks and whites exclusively to the latter (33). Goodman also points out such ambivalence explaining the character of Big Abel who could either be understood as perpetuating certain myths about blacks (comicalness or irrational loyalty) or as an example of personal development and the need of a new society to give expression to that (xxiii).

Virginia (Scura, "Richmond" 25). MacKethan argues that the manner in which Virginia dies serves to show the tragic outcome of the strict social rules that regulated the lives of women in the South: "a tragic but appropriate and unavoidable death for a southern lady bred and trained to act out her culture's fate in her very body" ("Design" 94). This idea can be linked with the feminist concern with the body as the basis to establish social, political and cultural differences between men and women (Woodward 103). Taken as the locus where there is a constant battle between the natural and the cultural due to women's capability for life bearing (Pilcher & Whelehan 6-9), the body's exploitation constitutes one of the key elements to the patriarchal control of women (Stacey 71).

The novel ends with the defeat of the Confederate army at Appomattox and the returning of Dan to a home extinguished by the fire. Betty, strong and self-confident next to a famished and morally distraught Dan, has the last word in the novel assuring her lover that "We will begin again [...] and this time, my dear, we will begin together" (Glasgow, *Battle* 512). Both of them have matured and grown through the previous four years and their relationship seems to be one that is not based on dependency (Dillard qtd. in MacKethan, "Design" 97). In spite of the open ending, taking into consideration what has been explained about the character of Betty it seems unlikely that she may have retreated back to the traditional models of femininity after the war was over. As it will be further explained, the consolidation of the myth of the Lost Cause and the returning of the men home prompted a retreat of many women to their former positions in favour of maintaining their racial and class privileges (González Groba, "Ashes" 38). The qualities that they had to develop during the conflict were used to the advantage of men and epitomised in the image of the "iron magnolias": delicate on the surface but with a reservoir of strong qualities to be deployed under hard circumstances. Likewise,

their home confinement increased. Scott quotes from one of the toasts, the one to women, at an anniversary meeting of the Charleston Board of Trade that took place two years after the end of the war:

The domestic circle, the school, the hospital, the bedside of suffering – these are the true sphere of woman. It is her mission to make home happy, to keep burning the lamp of religion, to teach men virtue. May the day never come when her beautiful nature shall be lowered to the arena of politics and party strife. (Scott 97)

Women were being banned from the public sphere, even before this was totally consolidated in the increasingly industrialized South. However, as Scott explains, the war was like a “tidal wave” (81): it acted as a revulsive to settle the first changes and speed the transformations that were taking place in the rest of the country (81). In this sense, the outcome of the war was quite ironic since “while the Confederate men went to war to preserve the Old South, including its gender divisions, women’s roles were drastically altered by the war” (González Groba, “Ashes” 38). In this sense, the survival of the portrait of Aunt Emmeline could represent the lingering presence of this model in the years to come (González Groba, “Ashes” 41) and that is the way most of the characters see it. Nonetheless, this great-aunt could also anticipate other models, and Dan first finds a resemblance to Betty when he identifies “wit in her curved lip and spirit in her humoured gray eyes” (Glasgow, *Battle* 180). Her apparent innocuous and conventional life could hold some of her subversive power since, after all, she was the one who decided that love was better.

Feminist accounts of Glasgow’s work see in this novel the “fullest treatment of the Southern lady figure before Virginia” (Scura, “Early” 23) and I would argue that it is also as much a portrait of the new woman who is to overtake the New South. Glasgow

herself indicates that she is here writing about “the last stand in Virginia of the aristocratic tradition” (*Measure* 13) as part of the creation of a social history of her state. In terms of gender this work makes a statement at two different levels. On the one hand, it introduces the fatal destiny of the southern lady in the New South offering Virginia and her child as the sacrifices to a war fought on stale ideals (“Richmond” 25). This evolution is also shown through the symbol of the wedding dress of Molly Lightfoot which in relation to the occasion points out the engagement with the ideals of the southern lady. Later on it is used for a Confederate flag and finally cut into pieces for remembrance. This symbol stands for the passage of time and the “mutabilities of history” (Goodman, “Introduction” xxviii) with which Glasgow was concerned. She used the term “the dynamic past” in order to explain how the past should flow to the present and become part of the future in an unstoppable process of progression (Glasgow, “Dynamic Past” 53). On the other hand, it displays the non-conformist model through the figure of Betty who, in spite of still having some sexist bias, can be considered the first rehearsal of the future new woman present in the secondary characters of Susan Treadwell in *Virginia* or the protagonist of *Barren Ground*. MacKethan goes as far as to understand Betty as a new kind of heroine that inaugurates the “matriarchal design” progressively developed throughout Glasgow’s fiction. This author defines such model as “a structure of relationships based on sharing rather than competitiveness, on negotiation rather than self-assertion, and on integration rather than exclusion” (“Design” 90). Betty retains some specific characteristic that resist her full classification; she stands alone in her courage and character but she is able to create bonds with others developing a “strong individualism” united to “commitment to the family” and turning out as “independent and self-fulfilled” (MacKethan, “Design” 89; 99). Julius Raper has actually defined her as one of the representatives of the “post-war

matriarchal societies” depicted by Glasgow (*Shelter* 119) matching Dorinda Oakley in determination.

#### *VIRGINIA: THE TRAGIC FATE OF THE LADY*

*Virginia* was published in 1913 and is one of the best-known works of Ellen Glasgow. The author intended it to be a “candid portrait of a lady” (*Measure* 77) and, indeed, it was later described as “the most complete portrait of the Southern lady in fiction” (Scura, “Lady” 414). The title of the work encapsulates the essence of the character and the society she represents, as it suggests Glasgow’s native land and the heart of the Confederacy as well as the feminine ideal it breeds characterized by its physical and mental virginal purity (Wagner-Martin xxii). The narrative functions as an expansion of the model introduced in the previous novel through the character of Virginia Ambler, but if the former’s death is quick and unimportant for the plot, in this case the spiritual death and the agonizing survival constitute the core of the story. The novel develops through three different parts that suggest the abrupt departure from the evasive idealism to the clash with reality of her protagonist. “The System” introduces the southern society and Virginia as a belle; this is followed by “The Reality” that covers the years of marriage and motherhood, and concludes with “The Adjustment,” its most introspective part (Wagner-Martin xii), where the last vestiges of a girlish Virginia are permanently displaced by the fatal outcome of her marriage. The unity between the three parts is achieved by the combination of two elements: first, the effective placement of thematic elements such as recurrent motifs (illness) discussed by Phillip Atteberry (124, 126-7) as well as the use of mirror characters (Mrs. Pendleton); second, a progressive shift in the tone from irony to “sympathetic compassion” that, according to the author, “had turned a comedy of manners into a tragedy of human fate” (Glasgow, *Measure* 79). This was most likely related to the fact that, as acknowledged by Glasgow, *Virginia* was

crafted after the image of her mother (*Measure* 90), a woman whose “spirit was the loveliest [...] and her life was the saddest” (Glasgow, *Woman* 13).

The novel takes place in the fictional city of Dinwiddie and it spans from 1884 to 1912, during the “agony of defeat and humility of Reconstruction” (Glasgow, *Virginia* 8). In the heart of Virginia this city is an epitome of the South, and as such it exerts an unavoidable influence over its protagonist: “One could really know and understand the girl and woman only after one had known and understood the external setting of her story” (Glasgow, *Measure* 86). The main character of the novel is Virginia Pendleton, daughter of the rector, Gabriel, and his self-sacrificing wife, Lucy. Virginia as the representation of the southern lady is established in the first pages when she is described as “the feminine ideal of the ages” (Glasgow, *Virginia* 4). Both physically and mentally, her characteristics become more akin to the model of the lady as they are contrasted with those of her bosom friend, Susan Treadwell who, in the original outline of the novel, was to develop a more important role as Virginia’s opposite (Wagner, *Beyond* 47). Glasgow intended her to be “the variation from stock” (Glasgow, *Measure* 88), and, in contrast to Virginia she is not beautiful but she possesses an “energetic and capable mind” (Glasgow, *Virginia* 5) which, as we will see, turn her into a different kind of woman.

Virginia is the product of her society and in the novel the education of women is foregrounded showing how gender role expectations impose educational limitations on women (Richardson 11). This comes mainly from two sources: formal instruction (Miss Priscilla Batte as the head of the Academy for Young Ladies) and the mother. These women have internalized the male hegemonic view and its standards (Matthews, *Traditions* 81) and consequently act as patriarchal agents and transmitters. Miss Batte is of the opinion that the least a girl knows about her future, the best for her. Beyond the

subjects she teaches, the two essential lessons her students must learn are the importance of religion and the inferiority to men. Lucy Pendleton is, perhaps, the most pernicious influence since, being aware of her own sacrifices and penuries, she not only embeds in Virginia the same martyrdom, but poses love as the highest expectation for a woman. Glasgow masterfully blends the mother and the daughter as means to anticipate Virginia's outcome, her "bondage to tradition" and her "enslavement to the patriarchal culture" (Matthews, *Traditions* 85). As the narrator observes: "They were so alike as they stood there facing each other, mother and daughter, that they might have represented different periods of the same life –youth and age meeting together" (Glasgow, *Virginia* 236). This outdated and androcentric training has fatal consequences for Virginia because it makes her dependent and reliant on her husband and other males and, at the same time, it thwarts the process of self-development, virtually depriving her of any agency. As Wagner-Martin contends, "The chief object of her upbringing [...] paralyze[s] her reasoning faculties so completely that all danger of mental "unsettling" or even movement was eliminated from her future" (xix). At the end of the novel, she is victim of her lack of education when she is not able to assume Oliver's abandonment and re-structure her life.

After her marriage to Oliver Virginia fully complies with the duties of her sex. Oliver is a character rendered in a complex manner. At the beginning of the novel he clearly opposes his uncle Cyrus and his misogynistic attitudes towards his wife. However, as he yields in his profession his character becomes somehow damaged and he allows the tradition to win over his ideas conveniently complying with Virginia's sacrifices over his welfare (Jones, *Tomorrow* 250). The idealization of love lasts until her first pregnancy that fulfils Virginia's duties but is not so well received by Oliver.

The topic of motherhood is one that is extensively treated in the story first, as it has been pointed out, with regards to the mothers as gatekeepers of traditional moral values, and secondly through the direct experience of motherhood. Virginia embodies the view of motherhood as biologically determined and something to which women are mystically drawn. For her motherhood is the ultimate satisfaction, and her self-sacrifice for the benefit of her children turns into her “philosophy of life” (Glasgow, *Virginia* 318). Even after an attempt to relapse into her true self and giving in to the passion of jealousy, she is abruptly brought back to her responsibilities as a mother (which do not apply to Oliver as a father) to take care of Harry. This moment instantiates what Susan Suleiman calls “the myth of maternal omnipotence” or “ultimate responsibility” through which anything that happens to the child is attributable to the mother (29-31), prompting the view that Harry’s life as a child and as an adult depends exclusively on Virginia. Adrienne Rich has argued that it is imperative to distinguish two senses in motherhood: one that covers the relationship between mother and children; and the other that understands it as an institution (13). It is the second one that Glasgow criticizes in the novel and to whose pernicious consequences we stand witness. Virginia is never allowed to choose since her education has only prepared her for this, “calcif[ying] human choices and potentialities” (Rich 13). It also reinforces the division between the public and the private sphere that was becoming an organizing principle in the South relegating women, as caregivers, to the private one on the basis of gender-based labour division, thus exonerating the fathers from real responsibility (Rich 11;13). Finally, Rich also argues that women are alienated from their bodies as they turn into prisoners of their capability for reproduction (13). Not only this, but the myth of the southern lady embedded motherhood with a sense of perfection that obscured the problems and fears these women had to face (high rates of childbirth deaths, illnesses

and abandonment): “One of the most persistent threads in the romanticization of woman was the glorification of motherhood, with its great possibilities for the beneficent influence on the coming generations. Nothing in the myth emphasized the darker side of maternity” (Scott 37).

The female body becomes here also an important point of interest from a gender perspective. Jones claims that “only southern ladies embody further the definition of beauty as one’s physical self and of goodness as sexual purity” (*Tomorrow* 241). As it has already been hinted at, this model of femininity does not contemplate women’s sexuality detached from its role of reproduction and therefore it carries out a systematic repression of their sensuality (Jones, *Tomorrow* 245). In this sense, maternity was also a turning point and the perspective given in the novel renders the inability of bringing maternity and sexuality to a harmonic position: “the novel explores the conflict between the sexual drive and the maternal and reveals how they are, to some degree, mutually exclusive” (McDowell 112). This matter was explored at length by feminists theoreticians and critics of the second and third wave feminism, and Hélène Cixous, for example, reflected on how these ideas systematically separated women from their body turning it into a taboo (875).

I found that in this novel, almost all the bodily references are attached to the process of aging and in them there is a curious imbalance between Virginia and Oliver. Virginia, in her thirties, sees that “She had laid her youth down on the altar of her love, while he had used love, as he had used life, merely to feed the flame of the unconquerable egoism which burned like genius within him” (Glasgow, *Virginia* 341). That youth that Virginia has sacrificed seems to nourish not only Oliver’s spirit but also his physical aspect, for his rejuvenation is reiterated over and over in the novel in appalling contrast to Virginia’s situation. The climatic point takes place when in New York she hears

comments on the “middle-aged woman” he married. Age is of vital importance for Virginia since the only thing she has learnt to value is her physical beauty which was the one that earned others’ admiration. Virginia is not able to cope with the changing times or with her changing self, and her insistent need to fix nature (Jones, *Tomorrow* 246) goes against the principle of evolution. Jones compares Virginia’s aging process with that of Susan, for the former is a “fall from grace” (*Tomorrow* 246). The loss of her beauty delivers the first blow to her feeble identity, as Wagner-Martin explains, “once her physical beauty begins to go [...] whatever spirit she had also disappears” (xviii). The comparison of her decay with Susan’s late flourishing indicates to what extent Virginia is a character out of time in the rapidly industrializing South. The narrative time contributes to the settling of this idea: the internal time which covers from her youth to her forties accentuates the rapid decay of Virginia (Glasgow, *Measure* 92) and the external time stresses the extent to which she is neither physically nor mentally prepared to confront the modern times.

During her years of marriage and motherhood Virginia fully complied with the model of the southern lady. Dorothy Scura points out the split in her identity between her desires and the rejection of these (“Early” 30) best epitomized through her silk dress. After years of wearing worn dresses, one day Virginia indulges in the cloth for a blue silk dress. However, this ends up being dyed in black after the death of her parents for her period of mourning. Virginia’s increasing confinement within the home parallels her mental isolation, as Wagner-Martin explains, “Glasgow’s having Virginia withdraw so completely from society that she is almost incarcerated in her house is psychologically accurate.” (xviii). This isolation and confinement affect the independent development of the character’s self. Matthews argues that female bonds provide an alternative to “patriarchal definitions of women” (*Traditions* 83-4). Through spatial

isolation Virginia gives up the little contact she had with other women, chiefly, her best friend Susan. Mentally speaking Virginia never fully matures for two main reasons. Firstly, because she has always chosen, and the ending seems to indicate that she will always choose evasive idealism to reality. Through her, Glasgow criticizes the moral attitudes of the South where introspection “[lay] under a moral ban in a society that assumed the existence of an unholy alliance between the secret and the evil” (Glasgow, *Virginia* 224). Secondly, because her narrow-mindedness does not allow her to regard herself as another of these women that surround her, and, consequently learn from their mistakes or revolt against her imposed fate. When she is a girl she holds no regard for the past; she thinks that the future will offer her something better than her mother or her teacher, but she fails to see the truth in front of her eyes: “What she did not think was that her mother, like herself, was but one of the endless procession of women who pass perpetually from the sphere of pleasure into the sphere of service” (Glasgow, *Virginia* 42). Like her mother, she fails to see that these women live in and are shaped by history, that they are prisoners of the evasive idealism that leads them to “avoid seeing the reality of their own lives as women” (Jones, *Tomorrow* 242-43). This imposes a tragic blindness that will never allow her to grow as a person or develop any kind of gender awareness.

The turning point in the life of Virginia takes place when she is abandoned by her husband who has fallen in love with the actress of his plays, Margaret Oldcastle. The protagonist is hardly able to bear the news, and it requires all her lady training to avoid losing the dignity and begging her husband to go back to her. Losing Oliver implies the falling of all her ideals and leaves Virginia totally broken. As Wagner-Martin points out she “is robbed of even anger toward her betraying husband” (xxi) and she is unable to confront either him or his lover. Glasgow stated that what Virginia had lost was her

“instinct of self-preservation” (*Measure* 91) and, in fact, through her reaction the reader can see the alienation she suffers. Having outlived her usefulness, she only contemplates death because her society has not prepared her for this moment. As Paul Jones says:

Tragically, she cannot conceive of searching for her own fulfillment or happiness outside of these traditional roles because she has never been taught that there is such a thing. True Womanhood has not made women strong or capable; it has only created women who cannot exist outside the roles of a wife and a mother. (37)

Yet, Virginia seems to be saved to an extent by her son Harry, who informs her of his return home. This unexpected ending has been accounted for in the criticism in two different ways which pose Virginia in different positions. Jones argues that Harry, the best-loved son of Virginia, turns into the victim of her only power, a misplaced love (*Tomorrow* 248). In this sense Virginia is given something to live for but her son must pay by renouncing his personal growth (Shelton 505). From a gender perspective, however, Matthews sees the returning of the son home to take care of the mother as the final expression of the extent to which Virginia lies at the mercy of the patriarchal tradition, as she is the object of “transmission from father to husband to son that is her legacy” (*Traditions* 86). As it can be seen, the ending proves problematic. However, turning aside Glasgow’s ambivalences and attachment to this character, the consideration of the novel as a whole seems to tilt the scale in favour of the second reading. Harry is endowed with a privileged position in terms of gender in a society where men are allowed absolute freedom from familial responsibilities but also with an education that draws him away from his southern community and into the modern European and American world, and, most importantly, with a mother who in spite of

being defeated still believes in the ideals with which she was raised and that demand blind sacrifices to her offspring.

Throughout the novel Glasgow uses a number of male and female characters that further develop and qualify the protagonist's trajectory. Of these the most important are the vast array of female characters which can be better apprehended if classified according to the model of femininity each of them portrays. The older generation is represented by Belinda Treadwell, through whom Glasgow gives voice to one of the central concerns of the first feminists: the material inequality between men and women. Although Cyrus Treadwell is the richest man in the city, Belinda sells goods in order to make some money for herself. Likewise, she opposes her husband and moderately rebels to keep the company of the dressmaker, Miss Willy, her only friend. Bitter and an object of pity, Belinda represents the sad truth that lay beneath the myth of the southern lady. In this sense, the image of her in a rocking chair when Oliver finally accepts the post is paralleled later by Virginia. Likewise, her paralysis is also an indication of the death of the model of femininity she embodies (González Groba, "Mujer" 112).

The novel also offers a deviant character that belongs to an older generation, Mrs. Payson. Virginia meets her after moving to her new residence in West Virginia and the reader soon learns that her ideals are as different as her outward appearance. Being a suffragist and having attended college in the North, she is not afraid of expressing her opinions in public and together with her husband they represent a marriage founded on respect and a more equal relation.

Of Virginia's contemporaries, the female that stands out is Susan Treadwell, the representative of the new woman. She is aware that she can never be the prototypical southern lady because she is "full of ideas" and has "a mind of my own" and she is

proud of it (Glasgow, *Virginia* 104; 83). Later in the novel Susan marries John Henry for love and she succeeds in leading a more balanced life.

Although the novel does not offer too much information about these characters, it is easily inferred that Abby Goode and the actress Margaret Oldcastle are not conventional women either. Abby marries after spending her youth as she pleased and Margaret lives alone in New York earning her living without any external help. From the younger generation, both Lucy and Jenny considered their mother old fashioned. The first has married as she liked, and Jenny has opted for going to university. In several respects, the latter brings about the projects that Susan was not permitted to carry out, thus presenting a “brighter future” for women and showing, once more, that Susan was a woman ahead of her time (Wagner-Martin xix). All these proto new women, therefore, share some common characteristics such as “a commitment to life, a refusal to be formed by a mould, a fighting spirit” (Jones, *Tomorrow* 245) that would be further explored in the last novel.

Before concluding, it is worth noting another female character, Mandy, through whom the intersection between gender and race is introduced. Through her appearance the double oppression of black women becomes apparent. Animalised and oversexualized, black women were systematically used as objects of sexual gratification for the domineering whites even after slavery was over. The mulatto children born of these encounters became the unique responsibility of their mothers, as in this case where Cyrus never takes care of the boy he fathered. In terms of race we get a glimpse of the delicate situation of black people during the period of Reconstruction when they became victims of lynching. In spite of this, Matthews sees in Mandy a departure from the stereotyped rendering of the submissive blacks, even it is just briefly: “Knowing that

her only source of power over Cyrus lies in his past sexual vulnerability, she uses it to triumph momentarily over him” (Matthews, *Traditions* 81).

This is a novel about a woman, a woman who represented not only a model of femininity but a whole culture. Glasgow provided a realistic and complex account of the destiny of the southern lady in 1913, in a literary panorama dominated by the lingering modes of the Lost Cause that in her novel become food for fire.<sup>7</sup> This is what makes it still relevant today and, as Wagner-Martin explains, the novel “holds interest because it is so clearly a woman’s story told without subterfuge, given complexity and dimension because of the author’s own ambivalence and her ability to use irony and scene for such a complete effect” (xxiv). But her power extends beyond, for she did not only render the tragic life of this woman but criticized all those elements that contributed to her downfall, from the church to the family, and for this reason her critique extends to the South as a whole. This novel dramatizes the death of the southern lady, a symbol of “the declining prestige and the surviving pride of the post-war South” (McDowell 123). Virginia Pendleton holds strong resemblances with past (Virginia Ambler) and future (Eva Birdsong) characters. But she also constitutes a turning point in the evolution of her heroines. Women like her will slowly make room for others, like Dorinda Oakley, who embody a new model of femininity and a new way of understanding the female self in the world.

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<sup>7</sup> In his article “Burning Mrs. Southworth”, Paul Christian Jones explains how the death of the southern lady in the novel is reinforced by means of intertextuality, in the episode where the novels of the female author E.D.E.N. Southworth featuring sentimental accounts of women’s lives are burnt.

### 3: THE NEW WOMAN AND *BARREN GROUND* : DORINDA OAKLEY'S SELF-DISCOVERY

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought multiple changes to the United States. Their participation in the Great War had a great impact on social terms, especially in what concerns the position of women. After the conflict was over many of the women who had taken the jobs of men refused to step back to the domestic sphere. Many of them organized to improve their working conditions and demand equal rights, and the Suffragist Movement acquired its zenith with the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1920, through which women were enfranchised. These social changes prompted a consequent modification of the model of womanhood that prevailed until then. Transitional models of femininity such as that of the real woman displaced the previous one and the cult of true womanhood, introducing some of the future concerns. They were interested in female health issues and education was now encouraged as means to prepare women for her life duties, to maintain a better mental health and to provide training for the job market. Employment was more generally accepted especially in relation to material stability although a professional career was not expected from women. In this sense marriage came to be considered in more pragmatic terms as the election of the most able partner that could secure the future (Cruea 191-193).

Together with that of the public woman (introducing the female in the public and cultural sphere), this woman paved the way for the emergence of the new woman. This model comprised the “educated, self-actualized woman who had gained economic independence from a masculine caretaker” (Weaks 551-2). These women were more “radical” and they were differentiated from the previous model due to their rejection of the domestic sphere. They constituted the first generations to attend college and the ones who renounced marriage and motherhood in favour of a professional career as the

source of personal fulfilment (Cruea 199-200). Likewise they demanded a full “economic and civic identity” that would allow them to gain material independence and achieve political power without being judged exclusively in terms of their personal and sexual lives (Cruea 200). This model was rejected by the majority of the society, even by their own families, which led to the creation of “single-sex houses” where women who shared these ideas conformed “a support network who fostered independence and nurtured intellectual growth” (Cruea 200-201).

As anticipated, in the South things ran slightly different. The period of Reconstruction (1865-1877), characterized by the transition from an agricultural model whose main centre was the household to an industrial one, with the division of spheres, led to the New South. As Edward Ayers points out, society did not change so suddenly, something that provoked a “clash” between the old and the new (3). The loss of the war, during the first years, was not totally assumed but replaced by the Lost Cause myth. On the grounds of the superiority of the white South, defenders of the myth hoisted racial segregation and discrimination and carried out a process of regression towards past glories represented in associations like the Confederate Veterans, and the already mentioned United Daughters of the Confederacy. Their ideas were propagated through periodicals and literature of authors such as Thomas Nelson Page or Joel Chandler Harris among others (Coski 453-4). Likewise, there was a strict control over what was taught at schools and the pastors complied with the new version preaching that defeat had been a “form of discipline from God” and the Northern victory a sign of prosperity instead of moral rectitude (Wheeler 6).

The relative independence that women had acquired during the War was expected to come to an end and the myth of the lady spread across classes stronger than ever (Wheeler 7-10). The differences between the sexes were maintained and reinforced, as

Marjorie Wheeler explains: “a key element of this Southern Civilization was a dualistic conception of the natures and responsibilities of the sexes that precluded the participation of women in politics and cast ‘the Southern lady’ in the role of guardian and symbol of Southern virtue” (4). In this context many women were resistant to join the progressive movements and proof of that is the late suffragist organization. However, in spite of all the impediments, and with years of delay, women’s concerns and their experience of toil and courage during the war produced small changes that were the first steps towards full emancipation.

The casualties and injured of war prompted many women to look for jobs outside the traditional realm of home to earn a living. Many of these women were employed in factories but there were also others who became teachers with the consequent need to acquire a superior education, as Scott explains: “The increasing interest in education coincided with the need of large numbers of women to find paid employment” (111). Although working women were a minority, their mere existence already affected traditional gender roles (Scott 215). Upper-class women also started to be involved and the first “women’s clubs” emerged. Maternal and infant health concerns, as well as those related to working condition and education (189-193), preoccupied its members who soon became advocates of the vote for women as symbolic, but especially, pragmatic means to achieve equality in legal and economic terms (165). In a general sense there was an opening in society and a discussion of previously tabooed topics such as sex, contraception or miscegenation (Scott 2017-18). The myth of the long forgone marble-like lady was only regarded, if at all, as a façade to avoid criticism (Scott 225).

*Barren Ground*, published in 1925, was Glasgow’s preferred work for she estimated it to stand alone “secure in its weight and substance” (*Measure* 152). The subject of the

novel is distanced from the rest of the works analysed in terms of class. These characters are part of the “good people” i.e. farmers settled in the Virginian soil from the time of the pioneers who own land in spite of their humble position (Glasgow, *Measure* 156). It is imperative to introduce social class here as a category that intersects with gender since these “circumstances” affect Dorinda and determine, to a certain extent, Jason’s betrayal. But they are also the ones that ultimately configure her as a self-made woman, one of the traits of the new model of femininity she embodies. The novel has been praised by the critics with regards to form and content and how these blend through a “unified stylistic texture and a unified philosophical tone” (McDowell 160). Wagner goes as far as to state that this novel was the genesis of the author’s “great period” both stylistically and thematically (“Vein” 562). Although Glasgow made a conscious attempt to defeat the sentimental stain of the contemporary novels: “For once [...] the betrayed woman would become the victor instead of the victim” (Glasgow, *Measure* 160), the readings of the story are multiple and ambivalent: from a female pastoral to a tale of Southern stoicism (Gray 85).

Dorinda’s story is, as Elizabeth Ammons defined it, “hard and tough” (171). The hard-working daughter of a farmer’s family from Pedlar’s Mill, she falls in love with the idea of love which unfortunately is embodied in Jason Greylock who jilts her one week from the wedding. After her failed murder attempt, pregnant and spiritually devastated, she decides to leave for New York. There she suffers the inconveniences of economic insolvency and is struck by a car losing her child but winning a one in a lifetime opportunity: work and education. This is almost the first aspect (if we overlook the fact that she contributed to the family economy with her earnings and that she did not let herself die but instead tried to kill the man who had wronged her) that clearly differentiates Dorinda from characters like Virginia and approximates her to the model

of the new woman. For her motherhood is not a mystic instinct; in fact, she almost never refers to the baby and its death does not seem to achieve the status of a true emotional loss (Gray 86). Neither is it, from a more pragmatic perspective, the means to tie Jason to her since she never, unlike most would have done, tells him about her state (Cornes 160). In this respect, Lisa Hollibaugh proposes a refreshing reading of her miscarriage as means to problematize the biological and theological determinism according to which Dorinda's future would be fixed as that of a mother and a wife and that Glasgow confronts in this novel. According to Judy Cornes, Dorinda also possesses a more realistic vision of motherhood as instantiated by her own mother, who dies to save her son; Rose Emily, who has given her professional career as a teacher; and Mrs. Faraday, the only of the three who enjoys help to take care of her offspring (170).

It is worth noting here, however, that Eudora Oakley, Dorinda's mother, poses a slightly deviant archetype of the mother. In Glasgow's fiction, they "often embody the ethos of self-sacrifice and deference to men" and "attempt to teach their daughters to conform to the Old Order" (Casas Maroto, "Creative" 109). Dorinda's mother, however, exerts two different influences in her daughter: on the one hand there is the part of her mother that Dorinda rejects which is mainly shown through religion although not uniquely. Religion is at the core of Eudora's life as the source of strength, as explained by Hollinbaugh, "Her compulsive faith is the result of her disappointment in her marriage" (36). But Dorinda rejects religion and by doing so she gets rid of one of the essential patriarchal institutions that affect her life, displaying a total lack of regard for the moral and behavioural prescriptions that coerce, for instance, her sexual life. As the narrator remarks "the ever-present sense of sin [...] was entirely absent from her reflections" (Glasgow, *Barren* 202). She will only go back to church years after as an undefeated, successful woman. A different secular scene that prompts distancing from

her mother is the last sacrifice the latter makes when she lies to save her son from a probable death sentence, thus compromising her virtue and beliefs. Dorinda lucidly sees that this will end her and that, unlike her mother, she could have never “sworn to a lie” (Glasgow, *Barren* 335). Metonymically this shows Dorinda’s opposition to the evasive idealism which appears recurrently in the novel as the rejection of “indirectness and sophistry” (491). On the other hand, Eudora exerts a more positive influence on her daughter by providing a realistic view of marriage and giving her a piece of advice which is the epitome of feminine independence (Wagner, *Beyond* 72):

Marriage is the Lord’s own institution, and I s’pose it’s a good thing as far as it goes. Only [...] it ain’t ever going as far as most women try to make it. You’ll be alright daughter if you just make up your mind that whatever happens, you ain’t going to let any man spoil your life. (Glasgow, *Barren* 106)

Therefore, in spite of the Eudora’s conservatism, she is modelled as a more self-conscious and clear-sighted character than Lucy Pendleton or Julia Ambler.

After her recovery from the accident, Dorinda starts working for Dr. Faraday until her plans to go back home are precipitated by the imminent death of her father. This is the moment when Dorinda begins a new life. In fact, her awakening in the hospital is equated to a moment of re-birth (Anderson 390), emphasized symbolically through the white colour that acquires a double meaning: her recovered purity and her cleansing experience which “enables her to leave her dirty, squalid surroundings to enter a new, healthier phase of her life” (Cornes 162). The illusion of love is dead and she makes the best of her “aptitude for facing facts, for looking at life fearlessly” (Glasgow, *Barren* 187), and consequently settles the characteristics that will conform her character for the remainder of her life, what she calls, her “vein of iron”. Years later she reflects about this moment:

After all, it was not religion; it was not philosophy; it was nothing outside her own being that had delivered her from evil. The vein of iron which had supported her through adversity was merely the instinct older than herself, stronger than circumstances, deeper than the shifting surface of emotion; the instinct that had said, "I will not be broken" (Glasgow, *Barren* 476)

This passage shows the blatant contrast between Dorinda and Virginia Pendleton; what the latter had lost was precisely the instinct of self-preservation and this was her fatal mistake. Dorinda is a different kind of woman, broken but undefeated, she takes advantage of the circumstances to educate herself culturally and on the science of agriculture, a self-didactic process which approximates her even more to the model of the new woman.

When Dorinda goes back to Pedlar's Mill her plan is well-defined: she will set up a dairy and make productive the land run to broomsedge. Through Dorinda's enterprise Glasgow was able to foreground some of her character's strengths, at the same time that she articulates a critique on the South. The fact that Dorinda dedicates herself to agriculture rather than other "female jobs" functions as a sort of subversion of the traditional patterns where both men and women worked in the fields, on many occasions for wages, but were paid as a unit and men controlled the money (Sharpless 19). Physical work is for her a salvation, a risky enterprise which nonetheless allowed her to "turn disappointment into contentment and failure into success" (Glasgow, *Barren* 477). One of the most remarkable aspects of Dorinda is her connection with the soil and nature. This has prompted recurrent and polarized debates as it has been understood in different manners: from a vocation (Casas Maroto, "Identity" 102) to a means to control that part of herself associated with the previous suffering: "Controlling the farm [...] become expressions of her determination to compel the forces of life that

trap women –their physical desires, their cravings for love and affection– to submit to her will” (Muth 97). In fact, Raper argues that the landscape is used in the novel with two different purposes: as a screen for the projection of the mind and as a mirror of the protagonist’s body (*Garden* 79). Although this view poses an interesting perspective, it clashes with a plausible ecofeminist reading when it places Dorinda in the dominant position of the exploiter and obscures her dynamic relationship with nature epitomized in her statement “I belong to the abandoned fields” (Glasgow, *Barren* 250). From my perspective it seems clear that Dorinda sees herself more in communion with nature than as its superior; the attempt to make the barren ground fertile parallels her aim to make her life fruitful without the patriarchal prescriptions of her society. Thus, her “ecological power” subverts the anthropocentric and androcentric relation with nature developed up to that moment and, as Mary Anderson claims, it “establishes her in partnership with nature and provides an alternative to the power of conquest, exploitation, and domination” (391).<sup>8</sup> In this sense her success reaches a higher level: the object of her attack is not nature but rather the futile methods employed by generations before her and embodied in her father<sup>9</sup> and extends to the anti-progressive spirit that remained in the South.

Glasgow intended nature to be central in her work and this can be seen through the use of natural imagery to structure the different parts. This quotation summarizes the natural elements at the core of the narrative and it highlights the three different parts of the novel: “That’s the first thing that puts out on barren soil, just broomsedge. Then that

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<sup>8</sup> From the perspective of animal studies, it could also be worth mentioning the peculiar relation established between Dorinda and the animals and her inclination towards their sphere (Rainwater, “Animal Signs” 206-217).

<sup>9</sup> Diane Bunch argues that the novel renders Dorinda’s filtrations with the heterogeneous economy (desire, waste and expenditure) of the higher classes but also her retreat to an homogeneous economy of her family (production exchange and accumulation). Ultimately, however, it is the connection with nature and the satisfaction she draws from it that allows her to achieve a moderate heterogeneous model that contributes to her personal growth (17-24).

goes and pines come to stay – pines and life everlasting [...] We had to make our living from barren ground” (Glasgow, *Barren* 238). The first part, entitled “Broomsedge” covers from Dorinda’s relation with Jason to her departure for New York. The broomsedge is pervasive in the narrative and it acquires a multi-layered symbolic meaning as the representation of the land, its barrenness and Dorinda herself (Cornes 154). McDowell defines it as “a symbol of fatality in the novel –a potentially hostile force to those who must live with it” (147), so, in this sense, the broomsedge is equated to fate. As such, the broomsedge places Dorinda and Jason in opposition; she is the one who stood undefeated making the barren ground fertile. Jason, however, as anticipated by the neighbours, succumbed, and “the broomsedge had grown over him” (Glasgow, *Barren* 400) thus becoming the live embodiment of what the land does to those who cannot adjust (McDowell 150). The clash between these two characters is best seen in their dialogue following Nathan and Dorinda’s acquisition of Five Oaks:

“Yes, you have done well with the farm!” [...]

“That shows what you can do even with poor land when you put your heart into it,” he added.

“Not the heart, but the head,” she retorted sharply. (Glasgow, *Barren* 467)

The dichotomy between the two of them shows Dorinda’s progression and Jason’s recession. At the beginning of the novel she represents the fatal romantic view of life which Glasgow renders in her ironic use of another natural element, the moonlight. In the contemporary sentimental novels, this was part of the myth of the idyllic Old South; however, in this novel it is almost always threatening and associated to moments of great despair, like Dorinda’s attempt to murder Jason. By opposition, Jason is the one who embodied the scientific spirit, as can be seen from his will to teach the locals new ways of farming. At this point, however, he has renounced a realistic view of life and

yielded to alcoholic evasion. Unlike Dorinda he does not show any kind of growth, and her superior personal value is remarked through the mastery of the farming techniques he never put to use.

The second section of the novel covers the stay of Dorinda in New York and her coming back home to the purchase of Five Oaks and it is entitled "Pine". According to Inés Casas Maroto, this symbolizes "the hardiness and richness of Dorinda's pioneer heritage" ("Identity" 109). It is relevant that this pine seemed to be the thing to which his father was closest to, and Dorinda eventually uses it to commercialize her butter in the North over the name of Old Farm. Thus the tree traces a link between Dorinda and her roots, at the same time that it emphasizes her success and connection to the southern soil. The fact that it is placed in the familiar graveyard emphasizes the continuity of life among death (González Groba, "Mujer" 132). The last section of the novel, entitled "Life-everlasting", narrates the last changes that affect Dorinda: the death of husband Nathan and, most importantly, of Jason, whom she saved from the poorhouse. It introduces delicacy and beauty as the new qualities of Dorinda and summarizes not only her material success, but most importantly, her emotional satisfaction:

The flower, an emblem of Dorinda's artistic victory over chaos and her spiritual victory over despair, delicately asserts artistic values of beauty and permanence that stand in vivid contrast to the flaming broomsedge imaging and the wild desolation of the land and the uncontrolled passion of Dorinda's youth, and the harp-shaped pine representing her father's power merely to endure" (Bond 574)

This structure thus reinforces the process of self development which, due to the powerful natural imagery, can be read as one of coming closer to the nature. While in *Virginia* the self-development of the protagonist was conspicuous due to its absence, Dorinda is a different kind of woman. Multiple critics have argued that she succeeds but

only by paying a very high price, by suffering what Judy Cornes has called “paralysis of spirit” (168), and that this will only suffice her temporarily (Muth 101), Tonette Bond explains, in relation to the success of the farm, that she achieves it “by repressing all sexual passion and starving her natural sympathy and emotional warmth” (571). As we can see through this quotation, what lies beneath these arguments is often a reference not exclusively, if true, to her emotional detachment from people that, as we shall see, she eventually overcomes. Instead, many of those who consider Dorinda rather as a victim than a victor refer to her rejection of love, sexuality and the institutions of marriage and family as determined by the patriarchal standards.

I will start by analyzing the role of sexuality in the novel and how it has been interpreted. Frederick McDowell (151) and Benita Muth (95) have highlighted Dorinda’s control over her sexuality paralleling her control of the land. In this sense, the relation that Dorinda establishes with the land will be full of negative connotations associated with repression, but, as it has been explained, that is not the case, and most probably, this fact is what allows her business to be successful. A more positive means to account for this connection between land and sexuality has been issued by Elizabeth Ammons who refers to the cathartic and highly erotic response of Dorinda to a concert as a means to re-direct her sexual impulse towards creativity. This creative drive is the one that the protagonist ultimately employs in the farm to make it successful (173-74). Ammons states that this allows Dorinda to “reach heterosexual ecstasy without a man” (174) and this might be at the core of her rejection of conventional heterosexuality since this has been seen at varying degrees as the “heart of male domination” and “patriarchal control” (Richardson 152). Although this view is arguably the dominant one, in Dorinda’s case it was her past sexual encounters that placed her at the mercy of men; a situation she would most certainly not wish to repeat.

The second aspect that enters the discussion in intimate connection with this is marriage. In New York Dorinda rejects Dr. Burch who, according to Muth “more closely resembles her imaginary lover than Jason ever did” (96). She cannot bear to think of love or intimacy as she did before, and she stands by her motto of “being finished with all that” as well as by her firm resolution that “one man had ruined her life but no other would interfere with it” (Glasgow, *Barren* 382). And then suddenly she accepts Nathan’s proposal. Their marriage is totally deprived of physical love or emotion, for Dorinda understands that “the only marriage she could tolerate [...] was one which attempted no swift excursion into emotion” (Glasgow, *Barren* 366). Yet she only accedes after Nathan has promised not to interfere with her life or independence. The greatest persuader, however, is neither the material benefits that the marriage would entail for both of them (his proposal is propelled in the light of a contract) nor Nathan’s promises but rather the much more human fear of solitude and loneliness, since “as she grew older, the thing she feared most was not death, not poverty even, but the lonely fireside” (Glasgow, *Barren* 373). In the marriage, she assumes a dominant position for she soon realizes that “she was the stronger of the two” because “he cared while she was indifferent” (Glasgow, *Barren* 385).

The relationship between the two of them, nonetheless, evolves and the turning point takes place after the purchase of Five Oaks. Ironically it is the despicable behaviour of Jason that prompts the emotional answer from Dorinda, and in this moment “She saw Nathan as clearly as Jason saw him, but she saw also something fine and magnanimous in his character which Jason could never see because he was blind to nobility” and this draws her to the appreciation of true personal value: “He is worth twenty of Jason” (Glasgow, *Barren* 401). As this feeling settles, Dorinda slowly opens to “the protective feeling, so closely akin to tenderness” (Glasgow, *Barren* 404) that breaks the distances

between the two of them. Their marriage is not a traditional one based on sexual or romantic love that for Dorinda had proved toxic; theirs is love not based on possession of the other and for this reason it allows room for self-development and self-confidence. Contrary to what Raper claims (*Garden* 98), there are reasons to believe that Dorinda will not marry Bob Ellgood after Nathan's death. Reflecting on why she will not marry him, she wonders whether "is it simply because I am independent and don't have to marry for support that I can pick and refuse?" (Glasgow, *Barren* 473). This enlightens the idea that her previous decision rather than an unforgivable contradiction of character can be regarded as a further stage in her development: she does no longer need the support of a man materially but neither does she need it psychologically.

By the end of the story Dorinda has overcome her fears and settled into the dynamics of her new family: Fluvanna and John Abner. This aspect introduces two elements that further approximate Dorinda to the new woman by proposing a different model to the traditional family and a gynocentric network or relations. Out of all the women that appear in the novel, the two most important characters aside from Dorinda are Fluvanna (her black servant and later friend) and Geneva Greylock. The latter acquires more relevance as she turns into the embodiment of what would have been Dorinda's future, and Tanya Kennedy argues that she could even be considered as the "bearer of Dorinda's repressed feelings about her miscarriage" (57). After Jason takes to drink like his father and ruins his childless marriage, Geneva progressively deteriorates physically and mentally (Cornes 169), and she, periodically, wanders around town yelling how happy she is in her marriage and then confessing her macabre illusion that Jason killed their baby and buried it. In the end she kills herself on Dorinda's wedding day. The resemblance between the blue scarf that is found floating in the water in the "Ophelia-like" death and Dorinda's blue dress tailored to the taste of Jason emphasizes the

connection between these two characters (Cornes 166). Likewise, being the Greylocks the representatives of the Old South (Ammons 172) and the Ellgoods one of the wealthiest families, Geneva is close to the representation of the southern lady and her fatal ending determined by the paternal figures of her family who forced Jason to marry her.

Fluvanna Moody is the person closest to Dorinda throughout the novel. Similarly to Mandy in *Virginia*, her richness as a character stems for the intersection between gender and race. Fluvanna starts first as a helper of Dorinda, and critics such as Ammons have discussed that this frustrates Glasgow's attempt at creating a viable model of sisterhood: "What Glasgow's never questions is that this idyllic (from her point of view) sisterhood is the tremendous imbalance of power built into a completely unequal relationship" (175). Ammons summarizes the ever-present ambivalence of which Glasgow was accused in her treatment of black characters and of which we have seen examples throughout this work. Matthews adds that it is not clear if in fact Glasgow's racist biases permeate the narrative,<sup>10</sup> or if in this case she intends them as a sort of criticism of Dorinda's racial attitudes (*Traditions* 161). Although these critics make a valid point, an attempt to transcend race barriers seems to be in the works in this novel. Dorinda shares with her contemporaries (and probably with Glasgow) a number of biased, stereotyped views and patronizing attitudes towards blacks that the author renders through the focalized omniscient narrator. However, the importance of Fluvanna in Dorinda's life is not diminished by this fact, as can be seen by the description of their relationship:

The best years of her youth, while her beauty resisted hard work and sun and wind, were shared only with the coloured woman with whom she lived. [...].

The affection between the two women had outgrown the slender tie of mistress

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<sup>10</sup> In her poem "Education of a Novelist", Adrienne Rich criticizes Ellen Glasgow for her "benevolent racism" (Ammons 175).

and maid, and had become as strong and elastic as the bond that holds relatives together. They knew each other's daily lives; they shared the one absorbing interest in the farm; they trusted each other without discretion and without reserve. (Glasgow, *Barren* 349)

The character of Fluvanna acquires a double significance by virtue of her race and gender as further means to extend the subversion of the southern patriarchal and white-supremacist society: "Fluvanna's race, her gender, and her close relationship with another woman make her centrality in Dorinda's life a challenge to Pedlar's Mill racism, misogyny and heterosexism" (Matthews, *Traditions* 159). Thus, if not in vindictive protest like the new women, Dorinda still seeks the companionship of another woman and relies on her. Together and dressed in overalls, they confront gender stereotypes which deem women more appropriate as labourers than overseers, as well as the public stance that during the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw female bonding as sexually threatening and deviant (Matthews, *Traditions* 153). Moreover, Dorinda employs a great number of Afro-American women who take care of the milking process and other chores of the farm. From this perspective Ammons has defended that this novel poses a sort of dream community found in other contemporary works characterized by a "matrifocal and sororal reconstitution of reality" (174).

The second important element in Dorinda's new family is John Abner, one of the three sons of Nathan and Rose Emily who was born with a clubfoot. She has always felt drawn towards him and she understands it as a logical extension of her compassion for the disadvantaged: "As a little girl, her mother had always said to her that she preferred lame ducks to well ones; and John Abner was the only lame duck that had ever come naturally into her life" (Glasgow, *Barren* 351). After Nathan's children move to her farm the connection between the two of them becomes stronger and she adopts the

function of a surrogate mother: “If he had been her own son he could not have been closer to her” (Glasgow, *Barren* 350). Nathan dies and the rest of them leave, but John Abner stays, thus becoming the single male in the farm. John is surprisingly similar to his stepmother in his reading habit, his love for farming and his introspective character. As such, he strays from the patriarchal model of masculinity, a point emphasized through his vulnerability which does not allow him to enter the army (hence the inability to fulfil the masculine rite of passage in battle) and aligns him with the Other(s): the females, especially the women with whom he lives and the animals through which Dorinda understands him better. From this perspective, it is important to qualify Anderson’s view of marriage and family as “points of arrested development”. As she explains, this is what the traditional life with Jason would have meant (388), but, by opposition the new kind of marital and familial relations that Dorinda sets up together with nature, are productive and contribute to her growth. In this sense we can see a displacement of the nuclear family which is one of the major centres of inequality (Jackson 169) to other more balanced and less biological models.

All the events that Dorinda has to face, as well as her own choices and their consequences, are essential for her maturation and personal development. Much more similar to Betty Ambler than to the two Virginias, Dorinda is a woman aware of her circumstances: the past that has brought her to where she is and the future that she has decided to lead. The possibility of choice, the development of self-esteem which she “values more than love or happiness or anything outside myself” (Glasgow, *Barren* 325) and the reclamation of a voice of her own to tell her story (Matthews, *Traditions* 166) are the best indicators of the agency she has conquered. She defies the androcentric negative definition of women with respect to men which denies women subjectivity and selfhood (Braidotti 235). And most importantly, she has conquered them without

sacrificing her gender identity. In a society governed by androcentric standards, maturation is equated to “growth towards maleness” (Anderson 384), thus, Dorinda is trapped in an identity labyrinth where she needs to escape from the archetypal images of women, which are actually male projections (Anderson 387), preserving her identity as a female. She finally succeeds and acquires “her own individuality apart from the patriarchal culture that defines women in terms of biology and still maintain her link to the ‘female principle of creation and regeneration’” (Anderson 387). As mentioned above, here nature plays an essential role: “By overcoming the static barrenness of the land, she overcomes the dominating principle of Fate; by identifying herself with the land and finding her salvation through it, she reclaims her own creative ‘feminine’ principle” (Anderson 387). The novel may be about the emotional, erotic, and procreative deep female loss and pain (Ammons 177), but I believe that it is above all about a process of female identity construction through inner self-development and acquisition of agency; as Wagner states, *Barren Ground* provides “an account of the way a woman learns to know herself” (“Vein” 556).

The moment where we can best judge Dorinda’s growth is towards the end of the novel. The event that most marks her here is not Nathan’s heroic death, since she finds the hypocrisy of those who had mocked him off-putting, and a clear indicator of the pretense she cannot stand. On the contrary, it is the rescue of Jason from the poorhouse and his later death which at the beginning disturbs Dorinda but finally helps her achieve a sense of wholeness. The imprint that Jason has left in her is palpable throughout the story; after all his actions are the ones that set her in movement and put her former self to death. The extent to which he permeates her life is even expressed in her subconscious through dreams and visions. Her thirst for revenge is fulfilled through an oneiric form of castration in an early dream where she ploughs a thistle wearing

endlessly faces of Jason (Corney 163). In actuality when revenge comes (she buys Five Oaks and finally he has to depend on her for sustenance and care) it is too late for her to enjoy. However, this allows her to dismantle the inherited Presbyterian views that would have led to “regard his downfall as a belated example of Divine vengeance” (Glasgow, *Barren* 484) and grant her a clear view that youth and love had concealed: “No, he had not ended in the poorhouse because he betrayed her. On the contrary, she saw that he had betrayed her because of that intrinsic weakness in his nature” (Glasgow, *Barren* 484). The vision of Jason comes to haunt her on his graveyard when she remembers all the men of her life, and during the night that follows the burial. As the night is over, however, Dorinda has left the few remnants of the past behind and she seems to have finally achieved unrestricted satisfaction. The novel closes emphasizing this idea: “Dorinda smiled, and her smile was pensive, ironic, and infinitely wise. ‘Oh, I’ve finished with all that,’ she rejoined. ‘I am thankful to have fished with all that’” (526). For Raper this ending breaks with an otherwise “strong and true” story (*Garden* 100), since he considers that a close reading based on two opposing levels: whom Dorinda thinks she is and what she has done (“Transition” 147), will show to what extent Dorinda remains a victim of her own human nature (“Transition” 153). This view negates any kind of development in Dorinda’s character and comes to interpret her story only as that of a woman who turned revenge into a successful economic activity. Both Raper (*Garden* 97-98) and McDowell (147) point out the merging of Dorinda’s life with the seasons, and the former claims that the overall structure of the novel favours a more pessimistic ending, since Dorinda’s decisions have contributed to this outcome:

Nor does the novel itself lend its structural support to her faith in the eternal return of spring and summer; the discriminated occasions of the second half show that Dorinda’s time has become one without seasons –other than autumn

and winter. Since the dream of Jason's thistles, she has projected all her fertility into the land (along with her heart). She does the same here, by endowing the landscape with seasons and fertility she should know are no longer hers.

(*Garden* 98)

In my view, this reading of the story places too much emphasis on Dorinda's physical fertility, at the same time that it undermines her achievements. If we compare this novel with *Virginia* we realize that growing old here is not associated with death or unproductivity, but instead with a refreshing self-confidence and spiritual strength. Passages like the one that follows make this idea more apparent:

At twenty, seeking happiness, she had been more unhappy, she told herself, than other women; but at fifty, she knew that she was far happier. The difference was that at twenty her happiness had depended upon love, and at fifty it depended upon nothing but herself and the land. (Glasgow, *Barren* 470)

Furthermore, what Dorinda seeks throughout the novel is a sense of unity, but at a very young age she realizes that that completeness does not depend on the "love or motherhood", but instead, "the need went deeper than nature. It lay so deep, so far down in her hidden life, that the roots of it were lost in the rich darkness" (Glasgow, *Barren* 355). This "rich darkness" that she cannot decipher in her thirties is, as I see it, the self-knowledge which she has acquired throughout the years and that she reflects on after the man who prompted her fall dies. In this sense, it seems that the novel does not suggest that she is waiting for a new spring or everlasting summer, but that she can enjoy the satisfaction of her autumn, and that she can now face it alone.

The subversive power of *Barren Ground* stems from the challenges it proposes and that impact at two different levels. From the gender perspective I have developed, Glasgow presents a singular woman whose life challenges all the patriarchal standards

of her period and of ours. She rebels against the pre-determinism rooted at the spiritual core of her family and the Darwinism that ruled society offering her life as a feminist alternative to both of them (Hollinbaugh 34). As a southern woman, Ellen Glasgow was torn between the old and the new, who she was and who her society demanded her to be, and she was not afraid of rendering these dilemmas in her novels. In doing so her writing defied all the standards of the period breaking away from her tradition forged *according to* and *for* male writers. So, through this novel both Glasgow and Dorinda achieve emancipation. The woman who Glasgow represents here, and further defines in other novels, embodies all the qualities needed for the New South (González Groba, “Mujer” 136) which, as shown in the novel, had already penetrated the rural areas. The lady may rest in peace, for the future belongs to the new woman.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the preceding pages I have tried to offer a comprehensive view of two opposing models of femininity present in the works of one of the most prolific female writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in America. Being a Virginian native herself, Glasgow was well aware of the particular circumstances of her region and the process of mythification that was taking place during Reconstruction. Two different models had been transmitted to her through a mixed inheritance of reverence for the past and integration in the present, which produced a continuous ambivalence in the author. Her writing, however, was not to contribute to the permanence of pretense, but rather, she proposed a new project to be followed by many other authors after her: the realistic portrait of the South with its idiosyncrasies and the denunciation of the oppressions that lay beneath the illusion of sentimental fiction. One of her main concerns was the situation of women in her society as beings alienated from their true selves by an imposed and artificial model that exploited their bodies and used them as ideological banners of the region.

The first of the novels analysed, *The Battle Ground*, was published at the beginning of Glasgow's career. Its relevance stands on the grounds of being the first work where she demonstrates an acute gender consciousness through the contraposition of two types of women and their opposed development and outcome in the story. The author does this using one of the most relevant events in the history of the country: the Civil War. This conflict revealed the immeasurable abyss between the dominant Victorian model of the southern lady represented in the novel by Virginia Ambler, and the reality these women had to face during the war shown through the younger Ambler sister, Betty. In this novel Glasgow plants the seeds of two different types of women that she is going to deal with in more depth in the second and third novels analysed. Likewise, central

feminist concerns such as the body as the locus of discrimination and intergenerational women's bonds are introduced here.

*Virginia*, published almost a decade later, explores in full depth the model sketched with the character of Virginia Ambler. The figure of the lady is here thoroughly developed through the protagonist, Virginia Pendleton. In this work education and motherhood emerge as two fundamental aspects for the constitution of this model. The first poses the problematic mother-daughter relation in societies where mothers function as agents of transmission of the patriarchal standards they have internalized and as gatekeepers of the moral values associated with gender. Furthermore, the novel shows how institutional education promotes the hegemonic ideology based on gender division and the association of the female to the domestic sphere and, consequently, the functions that stem from this: reproduction and caring. This thwarts the development of women both mentally and professionally since they are only trained to become mothers and wives. The rendering of motherhood as an institution proposed in this novel shares, likewise, an important component of denunciation for it brings forth the gender inequalities and oppressions concealed behind the myth of maternity.

*Barren Ground* brings to a full completion the model outlined with Betty Ambler. Its protagonist conforms to the model of the proto-new woman in her rejection of the coercive domestic sphere and the functions associated with it to set up her own business. Therefore, the novel provides a less androcentric model of womanhood defined by a greater reliance on women's bonds, a reinterpretation of the traditional concepts of family, marriage and motherhood and a subversion of women's roles. This new network of relations together with the acquisition of financial independence are the major factors for the inner self-development of the protagonist and her efficacious claim for agency and self-definition. Likewise, the connection of the female protagonist with

nature anticipates less anthropocentric approaches to the land and to the related economic activities. Dorinda Oakley, therefore, stands among Glasgow's heroines as the paragon of determination and independence.

Studying these female characters, which belong to different stages of Glasgow's writing career, in contraposition and analysing their differing interactions with institutions such as motherhood or the nuclear family, as well as their evolution and construction of a personal and gender-conscious identity, allows us to reach two general conclusions. First, that throughout her novels Glasgow develops progressively the different stages of the emancipation of women: from the presentation of the two models of femininity in contraposition found in the first novel, to the metaphorical murder of the mythic lady and the final constitution of the new woman. The protagonists are the ones who carry the weight of the novels, but the message that the author conveys is masterfully projected in the secondary characters, either as mirrors to the protagonists (Julia Ambler or Lucy Pendleton) or, most often, as their opposites (Susan Treadwell or Geneva Ellgood). Aside from the clear universality of such development, this task is one essential part of the criticism that Glasgow made of the South, since bringing down the myth of the lady was a direct attack on the core of the illusion. Second, that her progression is also worth analysing in generic terms, since, throughout her career she perfected a realistic rendering of the southern social body detached from the sentimental fallacy of her contemporary authors. Hers is, therefore, a most subversive act for she uses the means to propagate the myth to her own advantage. In spite of ambivalences that haunted her, especially those of race that trespass these pages, her compromise to bring blood and irony to the South is thus completed, but her legacy as a universal feminist writer should not be overlooked.

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