

## **SOUTHERN IDENTITY IN ELLEN GLASGOW'S BARREN GROUND: A “CONFLICT OF TYPES”**

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### *Abstract*

In her work, Ellen Glasgow tried to resolve the warring tendencies present in her family and her region: the conflict between the female emblem of the Old South and the male emblem of the New South, the romance of the past and the reality of the present, the yielding feminine and the authoritative masculine. The story Glasgow told about the South, and her relationship with it, did not completely fit together. What it revealed was not a seamless progress, but a habit of vacillation, with the author never really sure where, if anywhere, to take her stand. Her fiction is a compelling hybrid which explains what it was like to live in a place of difficulty at a time of change. This is the essence of Glasgow's identity as a southerner, as of the conflicted cultural heritage she transposes into novels such as *Barren Ground*.

*Keywords:* American literature, literature of region, Ellen Glasgow, *Barren Ground*, American South, identity, Southernness, region.

### *Resumen*

En su obra, Ellen Glasgow trató de resolver las tendencias contradictorias presentes en su familia y su región: el conflicto entre el emblema femenino del Viejo Sur y el emblema masculino del Nuevo Sur, entre el romance del pasado y la realidad del presente, entre la debilidad femenina y la autoridad masculina. La historia que Glasgow cuenta sobre el Sur, y su relación con el mismo, no encajan por completo. Lo que revela no es una progresión fluida, sino una constante vacilación, ya que la que la autora nunca se muestra segura de dónde posicionarse. Su obra es un híbrido fascinante que explica cómo era vivir en un lugar en tensión en un momento de cambio. Ésta es la esencia de la identidad de Glasgow como sureña, así como de la compleja herencia cultural que refleja en novelas como *Barren Ground*.

*Palabras clave:* literatura americana, literatura de región, Ellen Glasgow, *Barren Ground*, sur de los Estados Unidos, identidad, región.

Ellen Glasgow defined herself as an advocate of progress and a modern South where reality would tear away fantasy. As she asserts, “[t]here are few places in the world richer in color and inspiration than our own South, yet because of the stagnant air, the absence of critical values, the flaunting of borrowed flags, the facile cult of the cheap and showy, art has languished among us” (1988:51). At the same time, her ties to the values of the Old South were strong, and therein lies one of the major conflicts in her novels—especially noticeable in *Barren Ground*. Dorothy Scura associates the ambiguity present in this novel with Glasgow’s conflict of types: “Ellen Glasgow identified with her gentle, Episcopalian mother and rejected her stern, Presbyterian father, but readers of her novels recognize the influence of both strains—cavalier and puritan—on her fiction as well as her personality” (1995:xi). She never worked out a satisfactory compromise, and herein lies the essence of her conflicted southern identity. Although she revolted against “the lingering fragrance of the Old South” (Glasgow 1943:12), a great part of her writing seeks to preserve those very traditions in a changing world. How, she asks again and again, does one retain the “grace and beauty” of the old system at the very same time that one rejects that system? To recapture those roots, Glasgow maintained that southerners could no longer look to the old aristocracy, which was no longer a force, but rather to the struggling farmers who she depicts in novels like *Barren Ground*. These people, not the aristocracy, were responsible for maintaining roots and thus they were the force to be reckoned with. For this reason Glasgow set out to capture in her fiction “the warmth of humble lives that have been lived near the earth” (1943:30).

Julius R. Raper in his book *Without Shelter: The Early Career of Ellen Glasgow* explains that the central drama of Glasgow’s early career had been to break free from the restraints of being southern, a lady, a Virginian, and of holding a particular religious or political viewpoint (1971:38). He contends that Glasgow retained some peculiar form of Jeffersonian agrarianism as well as the Scots-Irish fortitude that she called “vein of iron,” but she was also deeply affected by Darwinian philosophy. In later novels such as *Barren Ground*, Ellen Glasgow, half-intentionally, half-unconsciously neutralized the strictures she had voiced when, as a spokesperson for the New South, she had condemned the timidities—intellectual, social, and ethical—of the Virginia gentry. As Glasgow had put it, “[h]ere in Virginia we need liberation not from the past, but from the old moorings which have held the past and ourselves anchored in stagnant waters. The spirit of the past, I repeat, is not a dead, but a living spirit. It is not static, but dynamic” (1988:53). Frederick McDowell effectively phrases this shift in the following manner:

She grew more tolerant of aristocratic values when, after 1925, she became increasingly sceptical of industrial forces and of much in the liberal philosophy of progress which had dominated her at the turn of the century. She now saw that the “progressive” industrialized South she had once felt preferable to aristocratic

debility had, in its turn, denied certain spiritual attributes present, if only partially developed, in the older South of tradition. Although she remained more liberal in her philosophy of experience than the Agrarians who came to prominence in the 1930s, Miss Glasgow shared their distrust of the effects of a "mad industrialism" upon civilization in the South and at one point apparently agreed with much in their program, if we may judge by one of the letters to Allen Tate: "I find myself turning definitely toward your point of view and away from the raucous voice of the modern industrial South." (1963:38)

Glasgow came to recognize in the most admirable representatives of her own class an inner strength which at times of trial turned their apparent defeat by fate or circumstance into moral victory. As a result, spiritual endurance rather than the individual's vigorous realization of his own destiny dominates the later Glasgow fictional world. As McDowell puts it, the really distinctive feature of the novels after 1925 was "a comprehensiveness of view, in large part intuitive, which could see the best in both the old and the new and which tended to supplant the crisp vigor of the intellectual in active revolt against her inheritance" (1963:39), so notably present in novels like *The Miller of Old Church* or *Virginia*. In her early work Glasgow reacted most violently against the hold of the past upon the South. In her late work she could still be forthright in criticizing the lifeless aspects of southern culture at the same time that she increasingly distrusted the leveling tendencies she saw in contemporary democracy. This harmonizing of extremes was, in essence, the underlying principle of Glasgow's career as a southern writer, and her unresolved conflict proved to be most prolific as it provided her fiction with a most valuable ambivalence that is never totally resolved.

All along from 1900 Ellen Glasgow had been exhibiting her ironic treatment of her native land, in a long series of works which grew constantly more penetrating and impatient with sentimentality. And in 1925 she published *Barren Ground*, which W. J. Cash has judged to be "the first real novel, as opposed to romances, the South had brought forth; certainly the first wholly genuine picture of the people who make up and always have made up the body of the South" (1991:374-375). As Glasgow herself put it, *Barren Ground* was "outlined, indeed, as the first of my novels of the country, after I had completed, and dismissed from my thoughts, the final volume of my history of manners" (1943: 152).

*Barren Ground* remained Glasgow's favourite novel, to which she incorporated her personal philosophy of suffering. Of herself and her heroine, Dorinda Oakley, she confirmed: "We were connected, or so it seemed, by a living nerve" (1943:163). The writing of *Barren Ground* led Glasgow to a liberating creed of fiction (1943: 213), one that honored the world within over the world without. "I wrote *Barren Ground*," she recalled, "and immediately I knew I had found myself. [...] I was at last free" (1954:243-244). Finally she had found what she had been seeking since her teens: a

code of humane stoicism “sufficient for life or for death” (Glasgow 1954:271), a code that she herself understood to incorporate many of her father’s Calvinist values.

Like her author, Dorinda has always lived with Calvinism, either as an ethical principle, represented by her grandfather John Calvin Abernethy, or as a nervous malady, personified in her mother. Fashioned after Francis Glasgow, Abernethy is a retired missionary who sees himself entitled, in his roles of patriarch and minister, to colonize natives in Africa and women at home.<sup>1</sup> Dorinda has “as little place in this tradition as Glasgow had in the tradition of Southern plantation novels or, for that matter, in the tradition of legendary Southern belles” (Goodman 1998:166). Appropriate to Glasgow’s continued reassessment of women’s traditions in the South, the novel opens with a discussion of Pedlar Mill’s traditions, focusing on an original matrilineal heritage in her hometown that Dorinda will have to regain. The initial image of the novel, striking in its visual concreteness, emphasizes Dorinda’s isolation and also objectifies her:

A girl in an orange-colored shawl stood at the window of Pedlar’s store and looked, through the falling snow, at the deserted road. Though she watched there without moving, her attitude, in its stillness, gave an impression of arrested flight, as if she were running toward life.[...] Bare, starved, desolate, the country closed in about her. The last train of the day had gone by without stopping, and the station of Pedlar’s Mill was as lonely as the abandoned fields by the track.<sup>2</sup> (Glasgow 1986:3)

Such an introduction announces not only the desolation of the town and the surrounding landscape, but also the difficulty of female self-definition against a cultural backdrop that provides few models. Glasgow explained that she had decided, when she came to tell the story of Dorinda, that she would present the betrayed woman as a victor over circumstance, against such a backdrop:

What I saw, as my novel unfolded, was a complete reversal of a classic situation. For once, in Southern fiction, the betrayed woman would become the victor instead of the victim. In the end, she would triumph through that deep instinct for survival, which had ceased to be a negative quality and had strengthened into a dynamic force. She would be hardened by adversity, but hard things, as she said, are the last to decay. And she would never lose her inner fidelity, that vital affirmation of life, “I think, I feel, I am.” The only thing that mattered was her triumph over circumstances. (1943:160)

It was in *Barren Ground* that Ellen Glasgow first importantly celebrated that “vein of iron” without which the problem of human life seemed to her to admit of no solution. The phrase fascinates her; she uses it again and again, finally employing it

<sup>1</sup> Glasgow’s father was an “unbending” Presbyterian, mistreated his wife and children, and even his children’s pets (Prenshaw 2011:216).

<sup>2</sup> This book will hereafter be referred to by page numbers only.

as the title of her 1935 novel. What it means is that life itself is a struggle with barren ground and that it is impossible to defeat a human being who will not acknowledge defeat. Dorinda herself progressively acknowledges such a notion:

Despair overwhelmed her; yet through all her misery there persisted a dim, half-conscious recognition that she was living with only a part of her being. Deep down in her, beneath the rough texture of experience, her essential self was still superior to her folly and ignorance, was superior even to the conspiracy of circumstances that hemmed her in. And she felt that in a little while this essential self would reassert its power and triumph over disaster. Vague, transitory, comforting, this premonition brooded above the wilderness of her thoughts. Yes, she was not broken. She could never be broken while the vein of iron held in her soul. (141)

As Dorinda contemplates her position, the sense of victory over circumstance—and even a measure of success—is evident in passages such as this one:

Turning slowly, she moved down the walk to the gate, where, far up the road, she could see the white fire of the life-everlasting. The storm and the hag-ridden dreams of the night were over, and the land which she had forgotten was waiting to take her back into its heart. Endurance. Fortitude. The spirit of the land was flowing into her, and her own spirit, strengthened and refreshed, was flowing out again toward life. This was the permanent self, she knew [...]. Yes, the land would stay by her. Her eyes wandered from far horizon to horizon. Again she felt the quickening of that sympathy which was deeper than all other emotions of her heart, which love had overcome only for an hour and life had been powerless to conquer in the end—the living communion with the earth under her feet. While the soil endured, while the seasons bloomed and dropped, while the ancient, beneficent ritual of sowing and reaping moved in the fields, she knew that she could never despair of contentment. [...] Though in a measure destiny had defeated her, for it had given her none of the gifts she had asked of it, still her failure was one of those defeats, she realized, which are victories. At middle age, she faced the future without romantic glamour, but she faced it with integrity of vision. The best of life, she told herself with clear-eyed wisdom, was ahead of her. (408)

This triumph of Dorinda's has been variously read. Richard Gray states that it has been read as a resiting of Calvinist theology in secular terms, a feminist victory, and another version of southern stoicism (2000:85). *Barren Ground* is, I argue, all these simultaneously, which reflects, precisely, the ambivalence of Glasgow's southern identity. What a passage like the one quoted above makes clear is the author's own deep involvement in the inner and outer struggles of the protagonist; as Susan Goodman notes in her biography of Ellen Glasgow, "[t]he outline of Dorinda's plot—an awakening to self, nature, and artistry (landscaping the wilderness)—parallels that of *The Woman Within* and effects in fiction what

Glasgow [...] found more difficult in life” (1998: 167). Dorinda Oakley is a farm woman experiencing a moment of intimate contact with nature, certainly; she is the daughter of farmers realizing that there too, in farming, is where she must make her stand. But she is also fundamentally like her creator –who, in order to write this story, “went back into the past and gathered vivid recollections of [her] childhood” (Glasgow 1986:xii)– in that she is someone in the process of realizing her true vocation and, with that, a proper place and identity.

Glasgow later explained the choice she made for the setting of the novel, using a “metaphor of interpenetration of human body and the body of the earth” (Gray 2000: 85) which immediately locates *Barren Ground*'s genesis, as Matthew Lessig puts it, “amid a historical, social, and psychological landscape tellingly distanced from Richmond's tumultuous urban modernity” (2011:241):

For the setting of this novel, I went far back into the past. The country is as familiar to me as if the landscape unrolled both without and within. I had known every feature for years, and the saturation of my subject with the mood of sustained melancholy was effortless and complete. The houses, the roads, the woods, the endless fields of broomsedge and scrub pine, the low, immeasurable horizon—all these images I had seen with the remembering eyes of a child. And time, like a mellow haze, had preserved the impressions unaltered. They are the lighter semblances folded over the heart of the book. (1943:154)

This metaphor that Glasgow here uses of herself, just as she uses it of Dorinda Oakley at the end of the novel, is only one measure of the intimate relationship between author and character. Precisely, one feature that distinguished this novel from other Glasgow novels was its deeply personal nature. Glasgow had lived close to the dominating figure of the novel, Dorinda, for ten years, and she illustrated her own conflict of types in Dorinda's familiar heritage. Duane Carr states that Dorinda is perhaps “the most fully realized of those Glasgow characters with a dual heritage” (1996:340). Glasgow herself explained Dorinda's “conflict of types” in her preface to the novel:

The grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the immigrants had established the order of small but independent farmers, which was presently to stand as a buffer class between the opulent gentry and the hired laborers. Because he was well-favored, with a head that reminded one of an early apostle, Dorinda's father had taken a step above his humble station as a landless man, and had married the daughter of a Presbyterian missionary. Of this union of opposites, Dorinda was born, and the inherited conflict of types had kept her heart in arms against life. But she had inherited also a kinship with the solid earth under her feet, a long communion with the inanimate dust. Both the earth and the human breed were lean and depleted. (1943:157-158)

Dorinda's mother is from "good people" –as opposed, that is, to "good family" – occupying "the social strata midway between the lower gentility and the upper class of 'poor white'" (7, 9); she is industrious and diligent, and she brings to the marriage an ample inheritance. Her father, a "poor white," hard-working but ineffectual, proceeds "after the manner of his class" (7) to lose the entire inheritance. He is a "dumb plodding creature" who "like the horses was always patient and willing to do whatever was required of him," a victim of a "destiny" which has pursued him "from the hour of his birth" (10). And yet what gives Dorinda her sense of independence and allows her to escape the futility of her father's life is her realization that she has inherited good traits from her father as well as her mother. For despite his limitations, he has maintained throughout his life a closeness to nature that has allowed him to endure. This "kinship to the land" has been passed along to Dorinda "through her blood into her brain" (299), and combined with the determination to overcome and rise above obstacles, a trait inherited from her mother, it allows her to find her life's work in successful farming.

Glasgow identifies mothers as "the main purveyors of information about southern culture and as advocates who attempt to teach their daughters to conform to that culture" (Seidel 1999:157). These mothers often embody the ethos of self-sacrifice and deference to men that characterizes traditional southern mores; they represent the Old Order, the "subliminally understood set of values and expectations for southern women" (Seidel 1999:157). Dorinda's mother epitomizes the self-sacrificing personality endorsed by tradition. Modeled on Glasgow's own mother, Mrs. Oakley is a domestic servant who clings to religion and family reputation for solace against her difficult life as a farm wife. Eventually, she loses her ability to experience pleasure in any form. Her stoicism is transformed into debilitating self-pity which prevents the young Dorinda from regarding her as a trusted confidante. Mrs. Oakley's religious principles cause her to regard sexuality as a trial and a trap, thus preventing Dorinda from confiding her adolescent longings.

Glasgow is most concerned about the young women who try to escape the oppressively restrictive southern values of their mothers, and her strong heroines apparently adjust to her definition of heroism as explained in the following passage:

If we stop and look back a moment we shall see that the heroic figures in our own race are the figures of men who, one and all, broke away from tradition when tradition endangered natural development, who, one and all, spoke in terms of the future, who, one and all, recognized the law of progress as superior to the rules of precedent. Of all the men whom we revere most, there is not one whom we revere simply because he held fast by the old habit, the old form, the old custom. (1988:48)

Her heroines, therefore, rebel against the values of the past, "against the conventional southern expectation that they must marry and against the precept that

if a woman is beautiful, that is enough” (Seidel 1999:163).<sup>3</sup> They are often disillusioned with southern men and long for careers to develop their individual abilities and expand their sense of competence. Dorinda in *Barren Ground*, like Gabriella in *Life and Gabriella*, moves to New York after Jason jilts her, leaving her alone and pregnant. In New York, she meets Dr. Faraday, who, having put her back on her feet, provides her with employment, introduces her to scientific farming and lends her money to go back and renew the family farm. Dorinda suffers a miscarriage as the result of an accident, which has been considered “a convenient reversal of fortune, since it leaves Dorinda unburdened, free to pursue the vocation Glasgow has chosen for her” (Gray 2000:86). This, however, is only indirectly alluded to. What receives emphasis is the change in Dorinda; as she observes later when she returns to Pedlar’s Mill: “Nothing has changed. [...] Nothing has changed but myself” (202). When she returns home years later, although she is strong and successful, she is childless as a result of the miscarriage. After her betrayal Dorinda gives herself over to the destructive power of hate, and though in the end hate does not win, she always carries her scars.<sup>4</sup>

In *Ellen Glasgow: Beyond Convention*, Linda Wagner observes that her mother’s mental breakdown (resulting from her discovery of her husband’s black mistress), a collapse described sadly and bitterly in *The Woman Within*, gave Glasgow even more reason to regard traditional marriage as an unequal and unfulfilling partnership (1982:8 ff.), a notion which Dorinda comes to reject. As Seidel puts it, “the price a Glasgow heroine pays for her strength is high” (1999:163). She either has no men in her life or no sexual relationship with one. Dorinda marries Nathan Pedlar only after obtaining his promise that the marriage will be entirely platonic. She is done with the illusion of romantic love; she is through with any feeling that might dominate her. “You’re hard, Dorinda, as hard as stone,” Jason tells her, to which she replies, with an “exultant” smile, “Yes, I am hard. I’m through with soft things” (237-238). What that “hardness” enables her to achieve is measured whenever she turns to the land and her farm: to what she has *done* rather than what, like her mother, she has simply dreamed. Her life after her mother’s death is defined by work, as she reflects:

<sup>3</sup> As Urszula Niewiadowska-Flis puts it, the “tenaciousness of Glasgow’s wish to free women from bondage and her frustration with male supremacy” cannot be denied (2011: 14), and she herself claimed in her autobiography *The Woman Within*: “I was always a feminist, for I liked intellectual revolt as much as I disliked physical violence” (1954:163); yet often her feminism became, however unwillingly, tinted with romanticism and sentimentalism.

<sup>4</sup> As McDowell notes, despite her Calvinist upbringing Dorinda initially responds to primitive impulses in her wish to kill Jason after he betrays her (148): “Her will, with all its throbbing violence, urged her to shoot him and end the pain in her mind. But something stronger than her conscious will, stronger than her agony, stronger than her hate, held her motionless” (129).



When she looked back on the years that followed her mother's death, Dorinda could remember nothing but work. [...] She had worked relentlessly through the years; but it was work that she had enjoyed, and above all it was work that had created anew the surroundings amid which she lived. In a changed form her mother's frustrated passion to redeem the world was finding concrete expression. [...] And there was more than hard work in her struggle; there was unflagging enterprise as well. [...] Without borrowed money, without the courage to borrow money, she could never have made the farm even a moderate success. This had required not only perseverance but audacity as well; and it had required audacity again to permeate the methodical science of farming with the spirit of adventure. (269-270)

Dorinda is not like her mother, then, after her transformation. Nor is she like her father, a pathetically unsuccessful figure who looms in her memory "as a titanic image of the labourer who labours without hope" (269). After Mrs. Oakley's death, the black servant highlights Dorinda's hardworking nature: "I ain' never seen no man work as hard as you do, Miss Dorinda. Yo' Ma told me befo' she passes away that you had stayin' power and she reckoned that you was the only one of the family that had" (267). What Dorinda has become is suggested by Glasgow's accounts of the liberating effect of the writing of *Barren Ground*—and by a passage like this one from Glasgow's portrait of her own father:

His virtues were more than Calvinistic; they were Roman. With complete integrity, and an abiding sense of responsibility, he gave his wife and children everything but the one thing they needed most, and that was love. Yet he was entirely unselfish, and in his long life [...] he never committed a pleasure [...] he held fast to property [...] I understand, now, that he must have suffered, beneath his stern fortitude [...] At his death, many of the men who worked under him [...] came to express their [...] grief [...] Over and over, they repeated: "He was always just." (1954:15-16)

The source of the power of *Barren Ground* surely lies here: in what Richard Gray adequately calls "the charged family feelings that Glasgow brought to it, as she engages in her own struggle for vocation—feelings that [...] were tangled up in Glasgow's case with the matter of Virginia and the story of the South" (2000:88). The transformation Dorinda experiences is to some degree one from old order to new; only to some degree, since she is as much involved in the secularizing of the Calvinist spirit and conscience as she is in turning agriculture into a business. Much more unambiguously than this, it is a change "from what—in her own variation on the narratives of state and region—Glasgow saw as the pliant, passive, yielding figure of the mother to the stern, active, unbending figure of the father" (Gray 2000:88): as Dorinda abandons the wasted, romantic, evasive model of Mrs. Oakley and her kind, she discovers her "vein of iron." Glasgow wrote "I was a radical when everyone [...] was conservative, and now I am a conservative when other people

appear to be radical” (1954:42). However, Glasgow was deeply conflicted, more than she cared to admit; the history of Virginia was, similarly, just as conflicted; and so was the history of the South—and particularly so at the time when Glasgow was, as she claimed, “a radical.”

Precisely, what complicates Glasgow’s account of Dorinda’s progress is the fact that in *Barren Ground*, as in *Virginia* and *Life and Gabriella*, attributes of personality tend to be gendered, with all that is passive, yielding and regressive associated with the female and all that is active, authoritative and progressive identified with the male.<sup>5</sup> This, almost invariably, complicates and problematizes accounts of the “New” or “Free” Woman that is Dorinda—especially when considering that Glasgow declared herself an open feminist.<sup>6</sup> Raper notes that Dorinda Oakley possesses so many facets and such contradictory ones, that she lends herself to contrary interpretations (2004:412). To many feminists, she appears as the epitome of woman’s triumph over adverse circumstances and over the weaknesses of men, chiefly those of Jason and her father. From a feminist perspective, the art that Dorinda creates at Old Farm is “matrifocal,” as Ammons explains:

Her mother greets her return with the simple, epiphanal words: “So you’ve come, daughter” [224]. The earth becomes a sentient presence —“The old feeling that the land thought and felt, that it possessed a secret personal life of its own, brushed her mood as it sped lightly by” [233]— and the central focus, the all-consuming main product of the farm, is milk. Cows, walking udders, obsess Dorinda. She insists that they be milked only by women, and making her special labor force all-female, she transforms Old Farm into a new, or perhaps very old, separate all-female kingdom at its inner core. A woman in man’s clothing (Dorinda defiantly wears overalls), Glasgow’s artist literally takes over male space, her father’s territory, and redefines it as female. Livestock, inner-sanctum workers, and boss all exist and function without significant contact with males. (1992:174)

To other readers, however, because the traumatic failure in love has hardened Dorinda, she seems one of life’s victims: while she succeeds in restoring her family’s depleted farm and lifting it to a prosperity it has never known, she turns her back on a series of men who would love her and settles instead for a *marriage blanc*

<sup>5</sup> The heroine’s self-willed behavior responds to conflicting impulses: “isolation from the alternative women’s tradition they seem to define and dependence upon the male world they seem to surmount” (Matthews 1994:31). For instance, Dorinda’s perception of her “triumph” as a farmer involves being admired by other farmers as if she were a man.

<sup>6</sup> Progress was something that came to seem less attractive to Ellen Glasgow as she grew older. She grew more fiercely and unequivocally conservative in her later years, as her novel *Vein of Iron* illustrates, thus following a familiar pattern among writers of her state and region.

(Raper 2004:412) to Nathan Pedlar, an unchallenging but good and practical farmer-businessman.

Glasgow's strong protagonists are singularly alone. Even though their mothers have destroyed the feeling that home is a safe haven and men are disappointing at best, Glasgow does not guide her heroines to friends for comfort and support. In *Barren Ground*, Dorinda stands as Glasgow's critique of mid-Victorian heroines, whose minds "resemble a page of the more depressing theology" (198). She refuses to take what God wills, and by choosing celibacy, she ensures a future "free from any form of social-sexual predestination" (Goodman 1998:167). But while Dorinda's choice may be necessary and admirable, nothing shields her from the realization that she is ultimately alone. Although she pays distant attention to Jason's wife, Geneva, out of pity for her and with a quiet glee that Geneva has lost her allure and her sanity, the only woman she feels close to is Fluvanna, her African American maid. It is partly through Dorinda's relationship with Fluvanna, however, that Dorinda is able to overcome the heritage of intolerance and determinism in Pedlar's Mill.<sup>7</sup>

Dorinda only finds meaning in life, hence, from work and in the land. Her relationship with nature is personal and self-reflective: "Kinship with the land was filtering through her blood into her brain; and she knew that this transfigured instinct was blended of pity, memory, and passion. Dimly she felt that only through this emotion could she attain permanent liberation of spirit" (299). This mysterious unity with the land becomes the guiding principle in the novel.<sup>8</sup> Embracing the Calvinist beliefs (divorced from their religious context) of firmness and frugality, Dorinda grows to resemble Glasgow as she appears in *The Woman Within*. Dorinda's "deep instinct for survival" becomes "a dynamic force" (1943:160) –indicated by the section titles "Broomsedge," "Pine," and "Life-Everlasting"– that transforms, as does art itself, barren ground.

The symbolic use of the land in *Barren Ground* is remarkable: the wastes of broomsedge at Pedlar's Mill dominate characters and action alike. The very title of

<sup>7</sup> Matthew Lessig argues that Dorinda's desire for Fluvanna's loyalty masks "a dependence on black labor that threatens to compromise the novel's project of agricultural reform and rural modernization" (2011:242). Similarly, Jean C. Griffith believes that Glasgow makes use of the supposed shortcomings of her black characters in order to reinforce the virtues of her white heroine; in other words, she claims the novel makes about African Americans themselves really serve "to illuminate the white southern self, and in particular the 'racial structure' of Dorinda's 'vein of iron'" (2009:96).

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Harrison notes that, living and writing in Virginia, Glasgow was "subject to a particularly resonant pastoral tradition that established women characters as the flower of an aristocratic garden" and that "this mythic southern Eden reinforced antebellum ideals of class and race" (1990:47). Glasgow's use of the pastoral in *Barren Ground* represents a successful attempt to refashion the mythic southern garden, as she rejects the plantation tradition and presents a stable rural community that depends on extended matriarchal families, thus revising southern tradition.

the novel is taken from the organic world that Glasgow repeatedly evoked in descriptions of the novel and of her process of writing it. McDowell notes that “the relationships fully probed in *Barren Ground* between characters and their native region demonstrate that Miss Glasgow was responsive to Southern agrarian sentiment and that she also anticipated the preoccupation of later twentieth-century Southern writers with the inescapable influence of soil upon soul” (1963:147).<sup>9</sup> The relationship between land and women, however, is especially emphasized. When Dorinda’s mother dies and her brother runs away leaving the father’s land totally in the hands of the daughter, the two people who make the earth flourish and take care of each other are female. Their very names yoke classical and organic images: Dorinda *Oakley* and Fluvanna Moody, granddaughter of Aunt Mehitable *Green*.

The omnipresent broomsedge becomes a symbol of fatality in the novel –a potentially hostile force to those who must live with it. From the beginning, Dorinda has a sense of the land’s intent to close in upon the farmers of Pedlar’s Mill who struggle endlessly to conquer the broomsedge. One chief aspect of the book is the depiction of Dorinda’s efforts to frustrate its sinister influence. When the broomsedge intrudes upon the Oakley farm, she is oppressively aware that it does not relinquish what it catches, that the more determinedly it is grubbed out one year the more vigorously it thrives the next. Old Matthew Fairlamb, a creaking figure of doom as ancient as the landscape, contends that “you’ve got to conquer the land in the beginning, or it’ll conquer you before you’re through with it” (14).

At the close of the novel the broomsedge is potentially triumphant once again at Pedlar’s Mill. After World War I, when the high cost of labor brings ruin to many farmers, the broomsedge is ready to absorb the cultivated fields and to bring the roads into disrepair. This circular aspect and continuity of the processes of nature is implicit in the undulatory images used to describe the motion of the broomsedge wastes, “that symbol of desolation” (107), or the progress of light and shadow across them: “A slow procession of shadows was moving across the broomsedge, where little waves of light quivered and disappeared and quivered and disappeared and quivered again like ripples in running water” (252). The portrayal of these flowing and ebbing rhythms was essential to Ellen Glasgow to convey the relation between humans and nature, as she stated in the preface to *Barren Ground*:

Leaves budding, leaves falling, sun or snow, rain or dust, youth or age, life or death—this eternal sequence must place the tone of the narrative, and sustain the gradually lengthening effect of duration. Not the landscape alone, but the living

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<sup>9</sup> The novel was published almost simultaneously with the English translation of the first volume of Oswald Spengler’s *Untergang des Abendlandes* (*The Decline of the West*), which praised the figure of the farmer, and helped to shape the thinking of the southern Agrarians. Peter Nicolaisen notes that in *Barren Ground* Ellen Glasgow was more subdued in her praise (2006:193).

human figures must reflect the slow rhythm and pause of the seasons, the beginning, the middle, and the end of man's warfare with nature. (1943:159)

*Barren Ground* is divided, then, into three sections: "Broomsedge," "Pine," and "Life-Everlasting." The "Broomsedge" section details Dorinda's affair with Jason Greylock and her New York experiences; "Pine" chronicles her victorious struggle with the land, her sterile marriage to Nathan Pedlar, and her "revenge" on Jason through her acquisition of his farm Five Oaks; "Life-Everlasting" narrates Dorinda's middle-aged years (forty-two to fifty) and her adoption of and caring for the debilitated Jason. As was mentioned before, broomsedge, pine and life-everlasting also have symbolic uses throughout the novel, which many critics have described at length. Broomsedge is the botanical "fate" of the land and its inhabitants, as explained above. The harp-shaped pine that grows out of the Oakley graveyard is a symbol of the hardiness and richness of Dorinda's pioneer heritage. And life-everlasting, along with its obvious rhetorical value, is a symbol of peace and beauty on an otherwise blighted landscape. David Holman effectively describes the connections between sections and symbols in the following passage:

These three natural symbols, coupled with the sections named after them, intertwine into a complex theory of history in the novel, with broomsedge as the trap of the southern past, pine as a richness of the past that is translated into the present, and life-everlasting as a promise for the future. In "Broomsedge" Glasgow shows how the social structure of the Old South and its heritage has doomed the Oakleys and the Greylocks to a steady decline in the post-Reconstruction South. "Pine" shows Dorinda's rejection of the idea of historical necessity and her reshaping of her heritage by her literal clearing of the broomsedge. "Pine" is ultimately about the triumph of the individual over the forces of history. "Life-Everlasting" examines Dorinda's coming to terms with her society's and her own history and gives the promise that the reconciliation will continue in the future through her stepson, John Abner. (1995:95-96)

*Barren Ground*, then, illustrates how Ellen Glasgow was desperately caught between two worlds: like Dorinda, Glasgow was wracked between belief in the value of art and creative production and despair and cynicism about life.<sup>10</sup> They are both torn between traditional values embodied in their heritage and new stands on life. As E. Stanly Godbold observes, "Ellen herself was one day an old fashioned Southern girl and the next day a modern intellectual in total rebellion against the traditions of her past. In all of her life she was not able to shed either role, nor was she able to reconcile them" (1972: 204). What makes *Barren Ground* powerful is that it truly records the conflicting feelings, many of them violent, that Glasgow had about being a creative woman in the South. At the close of the novel, Dorinda

<sup>10</sup> Toward the end of the novel, Dorinda asks, "More than thirty years of effort and self-sacrifice—for what? Was there an unfulfilled purpose, or was it only another delusion of life?" (403).

seethes with resentment at the emotional deprivation she has been forced to accept by circumstances:

Yet because it was too late and her youth was gone, she felt that the only thing that made life worth living was the love that she had never known and the happiness that she had missed. [...] Nothing mattered but the things of which life had cheated her. [...] In that hour of memory the work of thirty years was nothing. Time was nothing. Reality was nothing. Success, achievement, victory over fate, all these things were nothing beside that imperishable illusion. Love was the thing that made life desirable, and love was irrevocably lost to her. (406-407)

The word “barren” in Glasgow’s title, the images of dead babies in the novel (e.g. the game Rose Emily’s children play as the novel opens, the nightmare of infanticide that drives Geneva to suicide, Dorinda’s miscarriage), and the widening gulf formed between Dorinda and her mother, which is partially but never fully closed, all suggest that *Barren Ground* is about female loss and struggle, about a female protagonist who has to exchange a chilling frigidity for her strength and independence. To Pamela Matthews, the “barren ground” is “the patriarchally controlled and transmitted *figurative* landscape –the ideology and the culture– against which Dorinda and other women are forced to define themselves and envision their destinies” (1994:166). But it also symbolizes the emptiness of past values that have become useless in the New South –be them gender, class or race-related. It ultimately points to the literal and spiritual inheritance of Glasgow’s heroine. The solution presented by Glasgow is embodied in Dorinda. Glasgow says that Dorinda’s strength and her consequent harmony with the earth will redeem these losses, as the ending of the novel suggests. The novel ends with triumphant images celebrating Dorinda’s “living communion with the earth under her feet”:

While the soil endured, while the seasons bloomed and dropped, while the ancient, beneficent ritual of sowing and reaping moved in the field, she knew that she could never despair of contentment. [...] She saw other autumns like this one, hazy, bountiful in harvests, mellowing through the blue sheen of air into the red afterglow of winter; she saw the coral-tinted buds of the spring opening into the profusion of summer; and she saw the rim of the harvest moon shining orange-yellow through the boughs of the harp-shaped pine. Though she remembered the time when loveliness was like a sword in her heart, she knew now that where beauty exists the understanding soul can never remain desolate. (408-409)

The success Dorinda eventually achieves is, to some extent, the result of her ability to impose her will upon historical forces. As Shawn E. Miller has put it, the Dorinda of “Broomsedge” feels trapped only because her heritage and ideology requires her to (2010:96). Her youthful infatuation with and seduction by Jason Greylock is a result of her idealization of his weaknesses into romantic nobility: she is

enraptured by his words, his appearance, and his idealism.<sup>11</sup> During her years in New York, Dorinda is able to break free from the influence of historical forces that controlled her life at Pedlar's Mill, i.e. the traditional values and conventions of the Old South. She develops the emotional and mental fortitude that will make her a survivor in the world that crushes her father and Jason. When she eventually realizes that her fate is somehow tied to the land her ancestors settled, she returns home. She takes over operations at Old Farm and eventually, through intelligence, fortitude, and will, rebuilds it and she later acquires Five Oaks, which Jason has lost to taxes and alcohol.<sup>12</sup> Dorinda ultimately succeeds against adverse circumstances, and her triumph is one entailing a complex combination of Old South and New South, past and present, matrilineal and patriarchal heritage, rebellion and Calvinist stoicism.

As Glasgow stated in the preface to *Barren Ground*, she had determined "to portray not Southern 'types' alone, but whole human beings, and to touch, or at least to feel for, the universal chords beneath regional variations of character" (1943:152-153). She acknowledged the universalism noticeable in her female protagonist: "Dorinda, though she had been close to me for ten years before I began her story, is universal. She exists wherever a human being has learned to live without joy, wherever the spirit of fortitude has triumphed over the sense of futility" (1943:154). Glasgow is correct in this assessment of the universality of Dorinda's predicament as a nineteenth-century woman trying to come to terms with the modern world.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, she also represents the southern woman and her conflicted existence in between two worlds, which effectively illustrates Glasgow's complex conception of southernness. For, as David Holman puts it, "although

<sup>11</sup> As Lessig adequately notes, the text accumulates many of the Old South trappings around the Greylocks and their farm, Five Oaks (2011:245). Both Jason and his father are given to drink and dissolution, and they are the only characters directly associated with the South's heritage of slavery and miscegenation. Significantly, their fields have fallen fallow and their fences need mending, and their once proud home is characterized by "dirt, mildew, decay" (134) and a "general air of deterioration" (146). As the novel's only planter presence, Lessig argues, "the Greylocks take the fall for the South's brutal heritage of slavery" (2011:245).

<sup>12</sup> Tonette L. Bond notes that Glasgow uses the pastoral garden that Dorinda creates out of the chaos of Old Farm and Five Oaks as "an objectification of the internal, psychological harmony which in middle age Dorinda finally constructs for herself out of the ruins of her affair with Jason" (1979:568). By endowing her heroine with the creative impulse to remould her fallen world, Glasgow can use the story of Dorinda's self-redemption through pastoral vision as a means of prophesying a new South built upon the permanent values of the mind. She transforms the farms into the idyllic setting of her youthful dream and in the process establishes upon a harsh reality of barren chaos a vision taking the shape of her ancestors' dream of an Arcadian South.

<sup>13</sup> Much critical discussion about *Barren Ground* centers on whether it can successfully transcend its southern regionalism to make a universally significant statement. Usually agreed upon, however, is Glasgow's intention to express through Dorinda Oakley an individual's progress toward identity and autonomy, that is, toward selfhood.

Dorinda is a victim of the changing larger world, she is also a victim of a uniquely southern view of history, the idea that the past is a force that constantly impinges upon the present moment and that must be confronted, struggled with, and incorporated meaningfully into the present. [...] Dorinda is in many ways an archetypal female martyr of the New South, who by her sacrifice and her fortitude brings the past into a dynamically creative, rather than destructive, relationship with the present” (1995:96).

Glasgow’s relation to her native Virginia and her depiction of southern identity in *Barren Ground* is evident. In writing about the South Glasgow wrote about herself, for as William Faulkner once said, “it is himself that every Southerner writes about” (Davis 1986:474). Like the generation of southern writers who followed her, most notably Thomas Wolfe and Faulkner, Ellen Glasgow was complexly ambivalent in her attitude toward the South. “I had grown up in the yet lingering fragrance of the old South,” she wrote in the preface to *The Battle-Ground*, “and I loved its imperishable charm, even while I revolted from its stranglehold on the intellect. Like the new South, I had inherited the tragic conflict of types” (1943:12). Although she, throughout her forty-year writing career, defined herself as a literary rebel, she did not completely reject her tradition. She began as the most girlish of southern romantics and later proved the most biting critic of southern romanticism; she was at once the most traditional in loyalty to Virginia and its most powerful satirist; the most sympathetic historian of the southern mind in modern times and a consistent satirist of that mind. Still, she could not reject what she loved—the culture, the people, and especially the landscape of her Virginia. The ambivalent attitude toward the South that she conveyed in *Barren Ground* is, therefore, a result of her own conflicted position in the changing South. In the novel Ellen Glasgow campaigns for a modernized South, rejecting plantation romance for rural realism, southern womanhood for feminine sexual autonomy, aristocratic rule for Jeffersonian democracy, and plantation for technologically advanced agricultural production. Nevertheless, the rhetoric that permeates the novel creates “a kind of counter-effect” to the rational manner in which Dorinda approaches the problems she is faced with, and reveals the essential conflict in Glasgow’s discourse. As *Barren Ground*’s final passage reverts to the “rhetoric of the soil” typical of so many other rural novels of the time, scientific methods of agriculture and modernized farming give way to ancient rituals which transcend historical contingencies. And Dorinda Oakley becomes the apotheosis of Glasgow’s own “conflict of types,” as she rebels against the past while finding usable notions in southern tradition, accepts scientific progress while affirming a ruggedly pastoral South, and questions patriarchy while embracing and secularizing her father’s Calvinist beliefs.



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