

## “Finished with All That”: The Death of the Southern Lady and the Emergence of the New Woman in Ellen Glasgow’s Fiction\*

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„Koniec wszystkiego”. Śmierć damy z Południa i pojawienie  
się nowej kobiety w powieściach Ellen Glasgow

VANESA LADO-PAZOS  
University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain  
ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4092-2398>  
e-mail: [vanesa.lado.pazos@usc.es](mailto:vanesa.lado.pazos@usc.es)

**Abstract.** Throughout her extended career Ellen Glasgow turned the lives of women into the subject matter of many of her novels. Adopting the perspective of gender studies, this paper proposes a comparison of different models of femininity embodied in the main female characters of three novels from different periods: *The Battle-Ground* (1902), *Virginia* (1913) and *Barren Ground* (1925). This study will reveal an evolution from the conservative model of the southern lady to the progressive one of the new woman. These characters’ interaction with different patriarchal institutions as well as their outcome will ratify the model of the new woman in detriment of the lady and demonstrate Glasgow’s progression in terms of genre from the sentimental to the realist novel.

**Keywords:** *The Battle-Ground*, *Virginia*, *Barren Ground*, Ellen Glasgow, southern lady, new woman, gender studies

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Contact details of the author: Faculty of Philology, University of Santiago de Compostela, Avda. Castelao s/n. Campus Norte. 15782 Santiago de Compostela, Spain, phone: +34 881 81 17 50.

**Abstrakt.** Na przestrzeni lat Ellen Glasgow uczyniła z życia kobiet temat wielu powieści. Przyjmując perspektywę *gender studies*, w artykule zaproponowano porównanie różnych modeli kobiecości na przykładzie głównych bohaterek trzech powieści z trzech epok: *The Battle-Ground* (1902), *Virginia* (1913) i *Barren Ground* (1925). Opracowanie przedstawia ewolucję kreacji kobiecych od konserwatywnego modelu kobiety z Południa do postępowego modelu nowej kobiety. Interakcja tych bohaterek z różnymi patriarchalnymi instytucjami, a także jej wynik, potwierdza wyższość modelu nowej kobiety nad modelem kobiety z Południa i przedstawia przejście Glasgow pod względem gatunkowym od powieści sentymentalnej do realistycznej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *The Battle-Ground*, *Virginia*, *Barren Ground*, Ellen Glasgow, kobieta z Południa, nowa kobieta, *gender studies*

Ellen Glasgow<sup>1</sup> is a fundamental author in southern literature and an ineluctable reference point on the path towards the consolidation of a female tradition in the region. Born in Richmond to an affluent family, Glasgow struggled throughout her life to overcome the “conflict of types” (Glasgow, 1943, p. 12) she inherited and that tore her between a mild nostalgia for the past and a crusade against the detrimental evasive idealism.<sup>2</sup> With a career spanning over forty years, she witnessed some of the major social changes the South underwent and reflected on them in her fictional and non-fictional writings.

Most critics agree that where Glasgow excels at the treatment of these issues is in her fiction: she not only made women the subject matter of most of her works, but she also strove to produce a realistic and truthful portrait of their lives that contravenes the idyllic representation found in the sentimental novel that dominated her contemporary literary scene. The theoretical framework of gender studies applied to the present analysis of different models of white femininity permits us to examine the construction of these female archetypes as products of patriarchal ideology. Paramount to this study is the progressive transformation in the treatment of central concepts such as the female body, the institution of marriage, the nuclear family, as well as matrilineal and female interpersonal relations throughout Glasgow’s fiction. This reveals the importance of financial independence as a means to reverse patterns of subjection in the interaction of female characters with traditional patriarchal institutions since material independence is the ultimate means for the physical as well as psychological emancipation of women. Thus, this paper seeks to trace the evolution

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<sup>2</sup> Glasgow used this term to refer to an underlying attitude in America whereby people preferred “a pretty sham instead of the truth” (Glasgow, 1916, p. 124). This was even more acute in the South, where the idealization of the ante-bellum period concealed the social imbalances of the slave system.

from the more conservative model of the southern lady to the progressive one of the new woman by comparing the female characters in three novels belonging to different stages of the author's career: *The Battle-Ground* (1902), from her early period, the only one of her novels to directly feature the Civil War; *Virginia* (1913), published a decade later and covering the period after the Reconstruction; and *Barren Ground* (1925), which deals with the turn of the century.

The myth of the southern lady and the model of femininity it entailed constituted one of the fundamental pillars of plantation culture and it became a symbol of the South itself. Although it shared some traits with contemporary Victorian models, it also presented distinctive features that can be accounted for by the region's idiosyncrasies. In this respect it has been pointed out by Elizabeth Fox-Genovese how the structure of the agrarian South made gender constraints more acute: while the division between the domestic and the public sphere prevailed in the north, in the plantation system the household was posited as the unit of production and reproduction “ascribing all women to the domination of the male heads of the household” (1998, pp. 38–39). The myth of the lady constructed woman as an artificial ideal; she was designated the paragon of moral perfection, “pious, self-effacing and kind” (Scura, 2002, p. 413), and as such she was responsible for the rectitude of her family and her community, for which she needed to fulfil certain duties: “satisfying her husband, raising his children, meeting the demands of the family's social position, and sustaining the ideals of the South” (Jones, 2009, p. 42). As explained by Catherine Clinton, this model, crafted to the taste of male slave-owners, concealed countless problems that women faced once they married and that affected them both psychologically (isolation, alienation) and physically (farm chores, the management of slaves, high rates of deaths in childbirth):

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. (1982, p. 17)

In spite of its artificiality, this model lingered at the heart of the South because in positing this religious, moral, sexual, racial and social ideal in inferiority to white men, it permitted them to “justify the perpetuation of the hegemony of the male sex, the upper and middle classes, and the white race” (Jones, 1983, pp. 9–10).

In *The Battle-Ground*, Glasgow develops the narrative around two upper-class sisters: Virginia and Betty Ambler. Each of them puts forward a different model of femininity and their outcomes in the novel are dramatically different. Virginia Ambler embodies in her physical appearance and development the ideal of the southern lady.

After her years as a belle are interrupted by the events of the war, she marries Jack Morson, a Confederate soldier, and follows him. Virginia is unable to cope with the times and she eventually perishes before the war is over due to a miscarriage. In this sense, the novel dramatizes a physical death where the female body is foregrounded. From the perspective of gender, the body acquires great relevance as the locus where the social, political and cultural differences between men and women that lead to the discrimination of the latter have been justified (Woodward, 2015, p. 103), and also as a means to naturalize certain cultural conceptions such as maternity or caring which have often resulted in the reproductive exploitation of the female body (Stacey, 1993, p. 71). Glasgow renders Virginia's last breath in an implicitly symbolic manner:

The *odour of the magnolia* filled her nostrils, and she talked of the scorching dust, of the noise that would not stop, and of the feeble breeze that blew toward her from the river. [...] A moment more and she lay smiling like a child, her chin pressed deep in her open palm. (1902/2000, p. 367; emphasis added)

As emphasized by the use of the magnolia, which was figuratively associated with the Old South and here seems to become an intoxicating force, Virginia's death goes beyond the violent annihilation of an individual when it is considered in the context of what she represents. From this perspective her ending can be interpreted as the destruction of the mythic *ante-bellum* South and the death of her unborn baby signals the inability of this system to propagate, as Constante González Groba explains: "Her death is symbolic of the passage into oblivion of the values inherited from previous generations which cannot possibly survive the war" (2014, p. 32).

Terrible as the luck of Virginia is, the narrative dwells to a greater extent on the younger sister, Betty, and her process of growing up and apart from the archetype of the lady during the war. Glasgow intended her to "personify the spirit that fought with gallantry and gaiety, and that in defeat remained undefeated" (1943, p. 5). Betty Ambler could be described as a transitional figure because although the novel ends before her married life is explored, her development clearly points to a rejection of the model of femininity embodied in her sister and taught by her mother. The unconventionality of this character is emphasized from the beginning both in her physical appearance (not conforming to the beauty canon of the lady) and in her attitude (active, open-eyed and rebellious). During the war she revolts against "the folded hands and the terrible patience that are the woman's share of a war" (Glasgow, 1902/2000, p. 329) undertaking the care for and provisioning of both her family and their neighbours. Notwithstanding this, her relevance transcends the direct input of her actions in the narrative when she is regarded against the backdrop of Glasgow's production at large, as she becomes the first step in the construction of a more progressive model of femininity that can be perceived in her later works. In this regard, Lucinda MacKethan

argues that within the author's novels Betty could be seen as the initiator of the “matriarchal design,” a system where sharing, negotiation and integration are prompted over competitiveness, self-assertion and exclusion, respectively (1995, p. 90). In the same light, Betty allows the introduction of recurrent gendered themes, especially that of mother-daughter relations which in these works predicate the type of female protagonist constructed. Julia Ambler is an especially contradictory case, mirrored in the differences between her two daughters: she is a woman deeply aware of race and gender oppression and injustice as can be seen in her wish to liberate their slaves after her death and in her lucid realisation of Betty's hard future for not conforming to tradition, but she keeps teaching her daughters that doctrine (MacKethan, 1995, p. 95). Besides, through Betty, Glasgow experiments with focalisation as a means to displace the centre of attention from the male dominated world of war to the female experience. As the focalisation increasingly relies on Betty she turns into the absolute protagonist of the novel, even the last words are hers. Next to her physically and morally distraught fiancé, she stands strengthened by the hardships of war and issues what cannot be but seen as a clear declaration of intentions: “We will begin again [...] and this time, my dear, we will begin together” (1902/2000, p. 512).

A decade later, Ellen Glasgow published *Virginia* which has come to be understood as “the most complete portrait of the Southern lady in fiction” (Scura, 2002, p. 414). In this text, Glasgow opted for a structural shift that was to be completed in *Barren Ground*: instead of following the opposition of characters found in the previous novel as she had planned to do in her drafts, she finally decided to make Virginia Pendleton the central figure. In complementation to her, the novel presents a vast array of female secondary characters that expand different dimensions of Virginia's life either by extension, as is the case of her mother, or by opposition, especially with Susan Treadwell, the representative of the new woman in the novel. The stages of development of Virginia's story are rendered in three different parts, significantly entitled “The System,” “The Reality” and “The Adjustment,” which suggest the protagonist's departure from the illusion of the mythic lady to her confrontation with reality.

With the action spanning the years 1884 to 1912, the novel covers the period after Reconstruction when the South experienced profound socioeconomic transformations. The model of the lady, however, still persisted in the upper classes, and according to Marjorie Wheeler, even extended to the lower ones, reinforced by the Lost Cause rhetoric (1993, p. 7).<sup>3</sup> Virginia Pendleton is described as “the

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<sup>3</sup> The myth of the Lost Cause emerged as a consequence of the South's defeat during the Civil War. Proponents and supporters of this ideology extolled the values of the Confederacy as well as its superiority to the North and advocated for the maintenance of the *ante-bellum* social organization.

feminine ideal of the ages” (Glasgow, 1981b, p. 4), embodying the mythic lady both in her physical and moral dimensions. At the beginning, Virginia is still a teenager, and the novel opens emphasizing her training. Attached to her educational development stand two key figures: Miss Priscilla Batte, the head of the Academy for Young Ladies; and Lucy Pendleton, her mother and role model. Both characters are distinctively described in the novel as being the most pernicious influences on Virginia; the former is a firm believer that “the less a girl knew about life, the better prepared she would be to contend with it” and from her Virginia learns two fundamental lessons: “the superiority of man and the aristocratic supremacy of the Episcopal church” (Glasgow, 1981b, p. 9, 16). The latter, the self-sacrificing wife of the rector, passes on to her daughter her relentless martyrdom and teaches her that love is the ultimate goal in any woman’s life. These two women instantiate the assimilation and internalization of the dominant patriarchal ideology and act as transmitters of these hegemonic standards to younger generations perpetuating a model that was already doomed to failure (Matthews, 1994, p. 82). Glasgow masterfully renders this idea by accentuating the likeness of mother and daughter and anticipates the tragic consequences this will have for the second: “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” (1981b, p. 236).

Virginia eventually complies with the duties she was taught. She marries Oliver, the love of her life, and becomes a mother, one of the essential traits of the southern lady model. As pointed out by Anne Scott, “one of the more persistent threads in the romanticization of woman was the glorification of motherhood [...]. Nothing in the myth emphasized the darker side of maternity” (1995, p. 37). This aspect is extensively explored in the second and third parts of the novel. Following the model of her mother, Virginia turns sacrifice to her children into her “philosophy of life” (Glasgow, 1981b, p. 318), thus becoming the perfect representation of what the feminist poet Adrienne Rich conceived as “motherhood as an institution” (1991, p. 13). As she explains, this sense of motherhood is a barrier to women’s development and impacts their lives at different levels: women were relegated to the domestic sphere when the plantation system was dismantled and the division of spheres started to take shape, while fathers were released from any responsibility (Rich, 1991, p. 13). This has as its main direct consequence the lack of economic independence but Rich also points out other realms where women were affected, and it is here that the concept of the body reappears in full importance. This time the focus on the body is connected with two fundamental aspects: asexualisation and physical decadence. The model of the lady presents women’s sexuality as intrinsically linked with reproduction. Taking this into consideration, maternity

poses a turning point in the life of Virginia for her intimate life with Oliver virtually disappears after she becomes a mother. Frederick McDowell explains how Virginia's experience suggests that within the lady framework these two aspects of a woman's life can never harmonise: “the novel explores the conflict between the sexual drive and the maternal [drive – V.L.-P.] and reveals how they are, to some degree, mutually exclusive” (1960, p. 112).

However, where the body is featured more recurrently is in relation to the aging process. Towards the end of the novel the omniscient narrator reflects about Virginia:

She had laid her youth down on the altar of her love, while he [Oliver – V.L.-P.] had used love, as he had used life, merely to feed the flame of the unconquerable egoism which burned like genius within him. (Glasgow, 1981b, p. 341)

This summarizes the physical state of the character who, at the age of forty, has turned into an old woman. Her physical decay stands in appalling contrast to her husband's rejuvenation as emphasized by the metaphor of consumption. For Virginia aging is not synonymous with self-development and growth, and the narrative leans towards an inevitable comparison with Susan Treadwell who, faithful to her autonomy, flourishes in her maturity.

In her compliance to the model of the southern lady Virginia renounces key aspects of her personality and her identity as a woman and even her pre-marital female bonds, which according to Pamela Matthews provide the only alternative to patriarchal definitions of women (1994, pp. 83–84), thus, dooming herself to an isolation and a confinement which can be considered both physical and psychological (Wagner-Martin, 1989, p. 23). Tragically blind, Virginia has never raised gender consciousness as she failed to see herself as just “one of the endless procession of women who pass perpetually from the sphere of pleasure into the sphere of service” (Glasgow, 1981b, p. 42). After the shock of her husband's abandonment Virginia resorts with relief to the rescue of her most beloved son Harry. This demonstrates the extent to which she is left utterly at the mercy of patriarchy: she becomes, as Matthews claims, no more than an object of transmission from father to husband to son (1994, p. 86).

Complementary to the case of Virginia Ambler, Virginia Pendleton's downfall is a spiritual death that confirms the paralyzing perniciousness of the model of the southern lady:

Tragically, she cannot conceive of searching for her own fulfillment or happiness outside 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. (Jones, 2004, p. 37)

Virginia is a turning point in the evolution of Glasgow's heroines, since the author deftly counters her decay and death with other female characters' positive outcomes in this and subsequent novels. These include the already mentioned Susan Treadwell, Mrs. Payson, an outspoken suffragist from West Virginia, Virginia's own daughters Lucy and Jenny, and Gabriella Carr from her next novel, *Life and Gabriella* (1916), which Glasgow considered a "companion study to *Virginia*" (1943, p. 97). Glasgow thus reinforces the inevitability of the dissolution of the southern lady in the New South and indicates the consolidation of a new model of femininity.

*Barren Ground* became Ellen Glasgow's most studied and famous work. Published in 1925, the historical context differs greatly from that of previous novels, especially in what concerns the Women's Movement and its milestone: the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1920. The diverse social changes that took place nationwide were epitomized in the rise of the new woman, a model characterized by the abandonment of the domestic sphere and the search for economic independence outside the traditional gender roles of wife and mother. As already hinted at, immediately after the conflict the South attempted to relapse into *ante-bellum* dynamics, but the war had affected gender structures irrevocably.

Dorinda Oakley embodies a different model of femininity, and before examining the characteristics that make her substantially different from the characters analysed so far, it is necessary to bring social class into the equation. Unlike the other female characters, Dorinda belongs to the lower classes. Hers is a family of farmers who, in spite of owning land, occupy a humble position in the social structure (Glasgow, 1943, p. 156) and she works outside the home to contribute to the family economy. This aspect is not incidental in the treatment of gender since it is what causes, to a great extent, Jason Greylock (whose family would represent the remnants of the Old South according to Elizabeth Ammons [1992, p. 172]) to abandon her for fear of marrying beneath himself, which is what grants her the opportunity to become a self-made woman.

Dorinda's inner and outer journey begins precisely where the southern lady's would end: when she is jilted one week from the wedding while pregnant. In fact, in the construction of this character an identification of previously assessed topics surfaces in a different light. Regarding in the first place the educational and professional sphere, Dorinda is the only one of the characters analysed with a professionalizing education. After trying and failing to murder Jason, she decides to leave for New York and provide for herself and her child. However, her future takes an interesting turn when she has a car accident that causes the loss of her unborn baby but the gain of a unique opportunity for a job and education. She goes through a self-didactic process to become a prosperous farmer. When she returns to Pedlar's Mill she takes care of the



land and sets up a successful dairy farm that grants her and all the women she hires economic independence. This is a revolutionary act in this southern neighbourhood that still holds tight to earlier gender roles. One person that problematizes these attitudes is Eudora Oakley, Dorinda's mother. Both sides of the maternal-filial relation in this novel are worth analysing. Eudora shares the gender bias of her nurture but nonetheless puts forward quite a realistic view of the lives of women when she advises Dorinda: "You'll be all right married, daughter, if you just make up your mind that whatever happens, you ain't going to let any man spoil your life" (Glasgow, 1981a, p. 106). At the other end of the relation is Dorinda who does not accept uncritically the lessons of her mother, rejecting especially the inculcation of religious faith, but also such secular ideas as female self-sacrifice.

These are the first features that configure Dorinda as a new woman but in the character's interaction with different patriarchal institutions viable alternatives outside the oppression of gender are proposed. In what concerns marriage and sexuality, Dorinda's decision to marry Nathan is based on a contract whereby both parties improve their economic status, keep their autonomy and are not attached by the sexual roles of husband and wife. The lack of the imbalance that marriage normally entailed for the female counterpart allows room for development and growth, which can be seen in Dorinda's evolution from apathy to respect and tenderness for Nathan.

Likewise, the novel proposes a less biological model of motherhood. Dorinda never feels mystically drawn towards her unborn baby, and in fact Lisa Hollibaugh argues that her miscarriage could be read as a means to challenge the biological and theological determinism according to which Dorinda's future would be fixed as a mother (2005, p. 35). Instead, from the beginning of the novel, she feels attached to John Abner, one of Nathan's sons. This boy was born with a clubfoot, and this vulnerability is what makes Dorinda feel drawn towards him and consider him a son by choice: "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, 1981a, p. 351).

Apart from John Abner, another member of Dorinda's family is Fluvanna Moody, a black woman who starts as an employee but becomes Dorinda's only friend and companion:

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 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, 1981a, p. 349)

In spite of the racial prejudice that haunted Glasgow's fiction, in the relationship of these two women an attempt to transcend racial barriers seems to be developing. Their relationship is the culmination of what MacKethan identifies as the matriarchal design initiated by Betty Ambler, flourishing here into a gynocentric community that challenges the concept of the nuclear family and defies the *status quo* at different levels: from the conception of women's bonding as sexually threatening and deviant to the racism, misogyny and heterosexism of Pedlar's Mill (Matthews, 1994, p. 153, 159).

Multiple critics have read the novel as a chronicle of loss and emotional pain (Ammons, 1992, p. 177) and Dorinda's success only at the expense of her emotional drought (Cornes, 2015, p. 168; Bond, 1979, p. 571) but the narrative seems to suggest that it is as much a powerful rendition of female identity construction. These former views place much emphasis on Dorinda's lack of compliance with institutionalized ideals of womanhood and obscure the evolution of the character. Towards the end of the novel her maturation is conspicuous as she gives up revenge in favour of acquiring a wholeness that only her experiences have allowed her to reach. She emerges as a new kind of woman, one with a "vein of iron" that enables her to claim agency and build an emancipated and gender-conscious identity. Thus, through this character Ellen Glasgow lays the foundations of the new woman that will consolidate in the later characters of Ada Fincastle from *Vein of Iron* (1935) or Roy Timberlake from *This Our Life* (1941).

In conclusion, the comparative analysis of these female characters shows a progression from the more conservative model of the lady which is rendered in depth in *The Battle-Ground* and *Virginia*, to the progressive one of the new woman, outlined in *The Battle-Ground* and eventually fully developed in *Barren Ground*. Not only this, but, the different outcome of these female characters in relation to the opposing models of womanhood they represent ratifies the progressive model of the new woman in detriment of the lady who is killed both physically and metaphorically. In this way the author is able to articulate a sharp critique of the pernicious system of the mythic Old South and the evasive idealism that corrupted it. At the same time, the progression traced throughout Glasgow's fiction is also worth taking into consideration from a generic perspective since she effectively displaces the dominant form of the sentimental novel in favour of a realist portrayal of the lives of women and the oppressions that the system concealed. Her lifetime project to bring blood and irony to the South is thus completed.

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