

**Individual Sense of Determination and Cultural Tradition:
A Critical Study of Ellen Glasgow's *The Descendant***

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Abstract

This paper endeavours to deal with the stereotypes of female protagonists who move in a problematic and complicated world and live in a confined space pandering to male ego, accepting meekly the societal norms and constrictions in Ellen Glasgow's *The Descendant*. Glasgow portrays the tyranny of the tradition and the docile Southern women who in their angelic goodness kept up the inherited ideals of service, pity, loyalty and self-surrender and who gave their lives to duty and love, and sacrificed themselves. Many women are victims of men as well as the die-hard members of their own sex who think traditionally and obey implicitly the dictates of the patriarchal society. Thus this paper is peopled with Glasgow's women who are victims, martyrs, unrealistically innocent, embittered, frustrated and disillusioned. They are blind adherents to the past, subservient souls who wasted their potentials. They are losers or traditional earth-mothers, in short puppets on a string.

Keywords: Ellen Glasgow, *The Descendant Women*, Societal Norms, Tradition, Patriarchal, Male Ego, Individual

Ellen Glasgow establishes herself as one of America's most talented, dedicated and influential writers. Chronicling the struggles of a fallen South to reach accommodation with the legacy of the Civil War, she writes several novels. In her works she sought a commitment to truth, the living pulse of experience. Sometimes laughing at Virginia, loving it but knowing it, she has given to the world a realistic portrayal eschewing sentimentality. She seems to be the quintessential Southerner, seeking valiantly to hold on to the old, while embracing the new. She has grown up in the lingering fragrance of the Old South and loves its imperishable charm, even when she revolted from its stranglehold on the intellect. Though she rejects the old system, still she wants to retain grace and beauty in the system.

Glasgow offers stunning insight into the lingering subtle effects of a history. The Southern mystique consists of a strong sense of family, of land, of seasons, of the old biblical traditions and a stern sense of morality. She grounds her fiction primarily in the experience of the South, especially Virginia. Her novels portray how life is in Virginia and how life is and can be. Without distortion and misrepresentation she depicts the cultural history of the South. Her novels communicate with shattering force and directness both the grim reality and its strength and beauty. Hence one could see its violence, poverty, harshness and also its strong family ties, individual sense of determination and cultural tradition.

Glasgow captures the flavour and essence of her region without drowning in its idiom. She does not diminish her work by parroting already established Southern voices or depending upon stereotypes of landscape and character. It is the memories of the sounds of Southern conversation of the characters, of the heat, dust and smells of a Southern summer and the different configurations of a mid-town society that provide the main impetus to her work. The hauntingly unique South comes out vividly in Glasgow's novels as a refreshing antidote to the run-of-the-mill Southern novels. In *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman's Traditions*, Pamela R. Matthews addresses Glasgow's gender marginalization and misinterpretation among critics:

The history of Glasgow's critical fate demonstrates remarkably well not only the difficulties she must have faced in determining her own place (as a woman writer) but also the subsequent difficulties we have had in placing her life and work accurately.
(3)

In 1891 Glasgow starts writing her debut novel, *The Descendant*. At the death of her mother in 1893, she destroys all but the first six chapters of the manuscript. Her brother-in-law's suicide in 1894 too rattled her. She resumes her writing as a therapeutic experience and finishes writing *The Descendant*, but published it anonymously in 1897 as she is scared of the reaction of the reading public, especially the conservative Southerners to the smouldering radicalism contained in it. As expected, it created a mild sensation due to its daring statements. But the book is attributed to the popular male writer Harold Frederic. Taking it as a compliment to be read as a male writer and judged by established male literary standards, she remained silent. In spite of the overwriting and excessive melodrama, it reveals her imaginative force and structural expertise. Here the emphasis is upon the significance of heredity and environment, and the deterministic view of biological factors. She tries to show how the invidious bar of birth shapes the life of the protagonist, leads him into radically socialistic and destructive type of journalism, makes him a murderer and lands him in a felon's cell. Though he is blessed with a love of a woman who might have saved him, he scorns her love only to realize his folly when it is too late. Though this novel is pessimistic in tone and crude in its episodes, the genuine passion in its climax indicates future possibilities. Often Glasgow depicts the male as the hunter who inflicts pain and cruelty, and betrays the woman. Women and animals are the hunted. The greatest difficulty for a woman is to reconcile her inner needs and aspirations with society's or her man's requirement of a feminine nature.

In *The Descendant*, Glasgow portrays one such noble woman who selflessly sacrifices her talents for the sake of her lover. In fact the main focus is on the hero

Michael Akershem, the bastard child of a country wench and a dissolute aristocrat who abandons her. As Glasgow is bent on projecting her favourite theories of heredity and environment in the formation of personality, she traces the life of Michael, his peasant heritage, his lack of social grace, his capacity for hard work, his pursuit of success, his brilliant career as a famous radical editor, his moral and physical disintegration, his reckless manslaughter, imprisonment, sickness and death. Only in the second half of the novel Rachel Gavin is given importance. Rachel Gavin, who has been related to the aristocratic New York Van Dams, is reared as a Southern lady. But this

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spirited brunette who has an independent streak in her opts for freedom and leaves home for a Bohemian life in New York. Setting up a small studio apartment, she pursues her artistic talent as a painter. With total dedication, she proceeds to create a masterpiece of her large canvas of Mary Magdalen, without realizing the life of the fallen Mary becomes symbolically the pattern for her fall and regeneration.

Rachel's meeting with Michael in a small restaurant leads to Rachel sketching him as John the Baptist. Finding her attractive, Michael courts her. Rachel is initially hesitant to accept love for, she is sure it will interfere with her work. Her reluctance comes out forcefully in her prayer thus: "Only let me live for my work. I ask so little, so little; I only ask to work - work - work. Steel my heart, make me cruel, hideous wicked - anything - but leave me my work" (*The Descendant* 115). Moreover her teacher admonishes her, "A woman is not like a man - a man may have many interests, a woman but one, or they are all worthless" (*The Descendant* 115). When love enters the heart of Rachel, it is the beginning of her decline as an artist. Succumbing to Michael's charm, she accepts him but refuses to marry him as she does not want Michael to betray his doctrine of free love. She has been brought low by her position as Michael's mistress and is snubbed by Van Dams. Rachel has believed herself to be emancipated. "She had once been heard to remark that she occupied a position in the most advanced flank of the New Woman's crusade" (*The Descendant* 82). In fact she is as ignorant as the most advanced of her sex. Glasgow says, "...she is levelling her guns at shadows and making a fierce onslaught upon mere phantom foes... She has not learned that the enemy of woman is neither God, Man, nor Devil, but her own heart" (*The Descendant* 82).

Love destroys Rachel's creative ability. Rachel sacrifices her career and ruins her reputation for Michael, but his ardour cools off and he grows indifferent to her. He begins to meet the intellectuals of the city and he fancies Anna Allard who does social work in the slums and lives with a crippled niece. Though heart-broken, Rachel selflessly, pretending a change of heart, gives him up so that he can be free to follow his heart's desire. She, who gives up her ambition and all other interests for love, now gives up love and proceeds with her work. She ekes out a living by copying designs for a dressmaker. Regaining her talent as a painter slowly, she is able to complete her Magdalen - her life's ambition. The acclaim of her teacher and critics indicates she has a bright future and she will go to Paris for further study in her field. But once again Michael enters into her life, now a broken man, sick with tuberculosis. Michael shoots young Kyle, who is once his adoring disciple, for a verbal accusation and ends up in prison. Contracting tuberculosis, he is released before completing his sentence. When he crawls back to Rachel, the forgiving Rachel magnanimously takes on the job of nursing him. Her tender heart is touched when she sees the transformation of Michael:

He is a picture of pain and misery and wasted strength; she saw a dread of her and yet a need of her, a desire for solitude, like the desire of an animal that seeks the covert, and yet like the longing for a ministering touch. (*The Descendant* 272)

So, she tends to the dying man and exults, "He is mine, mine for all the time!" (*The Descendant* 275). Ultimately the hunter perishes in the arms of his victim, still and un-reconciled to his fate. But Rachel, his victim, the sensitive and selfless woman, though suffers in silence, survives. Rachel is a success in Glasgow's terms. Rachel who gives up art for love, suffers, when she

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renounces love and turns her energy to art she becomes successful. Now in her triumph and new security she can afford forgiveness and pity for the sick. Michael's rapid fall indicates Glasgow is anxious to avenge Rachel than to bring Michael to self-realization.

Glasgow's men characters are the weakest, but she is not bitter about them; neither does she idealize her women. Though she has been called a feminist, this is true only in a qualified sense. She is no idolater of her own sex. She neither projected them as total victims nor as victors. If their happiness perished, their honour remained. The women are shown to have the power to endure and the intelligence to adjust themselves to live an undefeated life even under the most unfavourable conditions. Her women characters appear to be stoics. Her interest in women characters stems from the fact that she herself is a woman. Hence, she will be able to portray, define or redefine the essential female qualities and the matrix in which they flourished or withered. Her interest is born from the fact that she is an ironist. She is amused by the differences between the traditional concepts of woman and her own personal concept. She wrote about women because their complexity interested her.

The eventual triumph of Rachel over her betrayer, her faithless lover seems to bear powerful personal significance for Glasgow. Thus, Glasgow pictures her women made of tougher fibres, endowed with indomitable will, fiery, at times reckless courage, clear thinking, intelligence, resourcefulness, adaptability and steely determination. Majority of her heroines lead an independent life choosing satisfying options of their own. Some rebel and do not conform to the traditional notion of women. Their defiance, in the midst of the effete Southern belles, makes them appear aggressive and even harsh but, they are full of vitality, poise, self-knowledge and self-assurance to face any eventuality. Triumphant over their adversities, they have proved their potential as seekers, survivors and achievers. In the female protagonists of all the novels discussed, Glasgow embodies the Victorian ideal. This novel studies the Southern woman as tradition, training, and circumstances have shaped her. This woman looks to the past or to a man for her ideas, and feels, there is impropriety in a woman using her mind to think. This Southern female sees herself as different in all ways from men whom she seeks to serve but never to judge. Southern man has privileges and pleasures denied to a woman and the Southern woman accepts those differences implicitly without demur. As an ideal woman, rooted in convention she does not examine the right or wrong of a situation, or even if she examines it, she does not voice it because she is emotional rather than rational. She is a silent sufferer who accepts unquestioningly her lot as inevitable. Her hopes and desires thwarted, this weak-willed meek woman only wilts under pressure and goes down without putting up a brave fight against the vicissitudes of life. Even if she raises her voice, it is a feeble protest drowned in the loud noises of the circumstances. The woman with a vein of iron stoically accepts life without love.

Glasgow shows keen understanding and comprehensive psychology. She sought a commitment to truth and brought out the living pulse of experience, by making the setting, atmosphere and language come alive. Her finely conceived art with its fire and lucid style makes her novels effective. Her novels are remarkable for beauty and clarity of style and for force in narration and character portrayal. Her craftsmanship is distinctive and distinguished, but it is the larger human, psychological and philosophical relevance assures for her novels a permanent place in Southern

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Literature. Glasgow gives sharply etched characters. Every individual character is distinct from the other. The characters are wholly rounded individuals, each vivid in his/her own idiosyncrasies, yet never a caricature. Her men and women are alive. In her portrayal of women, she shows variety and a fine distinction. Her women are reflexive, responsive and experienced. The men, in comparison, seem to suffer from self-deceit and hollowness. Hence, Glasgow makes women the centre of her action. Her frail women are the puppets on a string, bold women are the pillars of strength and her helpful barren are angels of compassion. But her novels prove that hers is far from being an androgynous vision.

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