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Ellen Glasgow's *The Sheltered Life*: An Analysis

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Abstract

The Sheltered Life (1932) is Ellen Glasgow's tour de force where the readers witness a constant struggle among characters who strive to preserve old social traditions in the face of modern changes. In the finest creation of Glasgow one comes across a lively narration of a society in decline. It gives a vivid description of broken relations where nothing exists like love, trust and relationships. As it is quite clear from the autobiography of Ellen Glasgow that throughout her life she had been suffering mentally and physically in isolation, the glimpses of the same can be seen in the portrayal of different characters in the novel. Thus the present paper presents an analytical picture of the novel with special focus on its characters and the theme of suffering, frustration and loss. It also focuses on the undying impression of Glasgow's own reflection on her work.

Keywords

Ellen Glasgow; *The Sheltered Life*; Betrayal; Loss; Love; Passion.

“Loss by death, disappointment in love and ‘social savagery’ motivated the search for truth in which Ellen Glasgow considered herself to be engaged throughout her career and which she intended to dramatize...”

- N.E. Dunn

The Sheltered Life is Ellen Glasgow’s finest work of art, which is also considered as her masterpiece. Ellen Glasgow thought that the novel should illuminate life; ‘the tragic light provided in *The Sheltered Life* is such an illumination’. First published in 1932, *The Sheltered Life* was hailed as Glasgow’s “most moving and penetrating novel” by Alfred Kazin. Queenborough is the urban setting for the action of the novel. Ellen Glasgow imagined Virginia City into which she breathed the atmosphere of the older Virginia towns she had known: their old streets and houses, their fading yet ‘still preserving customs, and their changing culture’. The Queenborough of *The Sheltered Life*, however, is drawn much more from the novelist’s own Richmond than any town of the previous novels. More important, however, than the physical resemblance is the representation of the neighbourhood as “a decaying district of industrial dirt and evil odors from which most of the older residents have moved to more fashionable areas” (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*).

In the novel “character, action and atmosphere interact to reveal not only the tragedy in lives shaped by the code of polite behaviour and by the pretenses of a cult of beauty but also the evil lurking in assumption of innocence” (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*). On Washington Street, in a once fashionable but now decaying neighborhood of Queenborough, lives General David Archbald; his daughters Isabella and Etta; his daughter-in-law, the widow of his beloved son; and his granddaughter, Jenny Blair. In the very first chapter one finds Jenny Blair discovering her hidden self, “I don’t care. I’m different” (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*). She enjoys her existence and feels ecstatic as she quotes, “I’m

alive, alive, alive and I'm Jenny Blair Archbald" (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*). She is greatly fascinated by Mrs. Birdsong who is portrayed as

. . . one of those celebrated beauties who, if they still exist, have ceased to be celebrated. Tall, slender, royal in carriage, hers was that perfect loveliness which made the hearts of old men flutter and miss a beat when she approached them. Everything about her was flowing, and everything flowed divinely. (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*)

Jenny Blair is full of reverence and admiration for Mrs. Birdsong. Even the slightest idea of meeting her leaves her excited:

"Jenny Blair!" her mother called in an excited tone. "Jenny Blair, do you wish to see Mrs. Birdsong in her new violet toque?" Springing to her feet, the child rushed into the library and flung herself between the red damask curtains. "Oh, Mamma, is she coming? Do you suppose she will speak to us?" (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*)

Throughout the novel Jenny Blair always tries to please Mrs. Birdsong through her little efforts. She is a little angel who adores Eva from the depth of her heart.

In *The Sheltered Life*, Ellen Glasgow used skillfully the narrative device of two points of view, everything is filtered through the mind and emotions of General Archbald and his grand-daughter: through the experience of the old man to whom life has given no shelter and of the child and then of the young girl whom custom and her family supposedly shelter within innocence and ignorance. One sees them when the old General is seventy five and Jenny Blair is almost ten, then later when he is eighty three and eighty-four and Jenny Blair is seventeen. Ellen Glasgow's ironic vision clothed these lives with universal and tragic meaning.

Mrs. Archbald, the General's widowed daughter-in-law is a southern lady who has found a substitute for thought in the precepts of manners. She was not unintelligent; she simply substituted for disturbing thoughts a much satisfactory, charming manner and cast of countenance with the appropriate

emotion to accompany them. In contrast to her, Isabella Archbald, whose concerns move on the periphery of the central action, emphasizes the suffering inherent in the lives of the other characters while showing the possibility of a lady's rebelling against custom if she dares. High spirited, attractive, passionate and unwilling to surrender to the pressure of the aristocratic code, Isabella refused to permit "a timid youth and a thoughtless violation of the usual proprieties to blight her life. Instead of weeping or piously retiring to an upper room after inadvertently acquiring the appearance of improper conduct, Isabella looked upon Joseph Crocker, a plain man, saw that he was good, and married him. Of course her sister-in-law, Mrs. Archbald, found it simple to convince herself, with the aid of a genealogist, that Joseph's family was descended from the 'real' Crockers, that his people were 'quiet' rather than 'plain' – even if they were Baptists rather than Episcopalians:

When so few standards remained unimpaired the distinction between plain people and quite people was almost obliterated by the first important step from the Baptist Communion to the Episcopal Church. And everything, of course was made easier because Joseph had so little religion... (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*)

Jenny Blair's poor aunt Etta, the General's other daughter, was not immured like some Southern spinsters because of an error. Instead she, as a physiological mistake was doomed to misery. Not only plain but definitely lacking the charm to attract masculine eyes, Etta suffered illness induced by inhibition and frustrations, turned her natural desires into scarcely suppressed lesbian passions which alienated woman friends, and fretted away her days reading yellow – backed French novels or having her nose packed at a young doctor's office. Now and then Etta appears in a bitterly ironic aspect. She, 'who is without beauty and can never be loved but only pitied', adores Eva Birdsongs for her loveliness-and Eva's beauty has brought her only heartache.

Eva Birdsong embodies a myth and is its victim: “She is the personification of the Southern beauty” (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*). She is crushed by the demands of that myth. With deft irony, Ellen Glasgow presents Eva in all her cruel glory before illness and the strain of living up to the demands of the cult of beauty had crushed her. Near the end of her career of pretense Eva tells Jenny Blair:

... when you’ve never been yourself for forty years, you’ve forgotten what you are really...I’m worn out with being somebody else- with being somebody’s ideal. I want to turn round and be myself for a little while before it is too late, before it is all over. (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*)

George Birdsong, Eva’s charming but ineffectual husband, had found it too great a strain to be worthy of so an idealized wife. He sought his satisfaction in more mundane interests such as hunting and drinking: having casual encounters with younger less charming, but easily approachable girls such as Delia Barron; or enjoying the warm flesh of his mulatto mistress, Memoria. George is neither mean nor evil; he is simply weak and careless.

George adores his wife after his fashion, but his fashion does not include fidelity of body or mind. Although he would never deliberately hurt her, he is naïve in supposing that his infidelities can be kept a secret from Eva. He can deny himself a drink or a cigarette while Eva is in the shadow of death, but he cannot see that she requires a moral vital loyalty. Because he has never really been aware of himself, he cannot give himself to Eva. He, too is the “victim of the Southern code of ‘beautiful behaviour’” (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*) which accepted the notion that a man might “know his world” and play any number of roles in it but still be admitted as a member in good standing in a society in which his wife had to move in a more restricted area.

Memoria, George’s black mistress, is sympathetically portrayed as both a force and a victim. When an infant, she had been rescued from a burning house

by 'gallant' young George Birdsong. As a woman, she serves as the Birdsong's washer woman and as the instrument of her rescuer's physical satisfaction. She is neither heroine nor villain, she is a capable, handsome woman who is respected and even admired by the white community of Queenborough which really condemns her though it suspects her role in the drama of the Birdsongs.

Memoria shares in the initiation of Jenny Blair into the adult world of Queenborough when the little girl falls on the walk in front of her house and the colored woman picks her up and carries her into her home. There Jenny Blair discovers George Birdsong; without realizing the meaning of his presence in Memoria's house, she agrees to share with him the delightful thrill of a 'secret': they will not say anything about her accident or about George's being in Memoria's house,

What a surprise! What an adventure to fall back upon! "Do you mean everything?" she asked in a whisper of ecstasy. Never had she dreamed of having a secret that belonged to her and Mr. Birdsong and nobody else. (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*)

So at the age of nine years seven months Jenny Blair becomes 'a part of the duplicity and passion sheltered behind the screen which her class cherishes as propriety.

Jenny Blair Archbald grows to the brink of womanhood in a carefully protected environment in which her elders follow the policy of their class in attempting to shield her from all awareness of evil or unpleasantness. Actually Jenny Blair understands much more than her mother and grandfather admit: but admitting it, she would be no longer innocent- and of course, "the pretense of innocence had to be preserved" (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*). From a natural, often- charming little girl, she becomes a pretty, selfish young woman whose circumstances conspired to teach her that "to be loved is really the ultimate goal for the women of her class" (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*), whatever may be otherwise pretended.

For Jenny Blair and those dearest to her, the innocence and self-centered existence of childhood become in her ripening young womanhood the sources of mortal danger. Spoiled by her family and sheltered by custom, Jenny Blair seeks only her own desires. Her mind so conditioned that she thinks she adores Eva Birdsong and at the same time desire George's more than avuncular attentions. Hers is the tragic evil inherent in a sheltered innocence.

John Welch, Eva Birdsong's cousin, who has grown to manhood in the Birdsong home, symbolizes a new generation which rejects the shams of the older and assumes a more realistic attitude. He and Jenny Blair do not like each other; for he sees through "her shallow, superficial self and she can't endure his awareness" (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*). To the Birdsongs and the Archbalds he seems a very nice young man who is too much in earnest about "reforming the evils he sees around him" (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*). He tolerates George and adores Eva: but he recognizes, at least in part, that her "unhappiness is the result of the strain of lifelong sham and frustration" (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*).

General David Archbald has lived a long life without ever doing anything which he really wished to do. Born "into a society which ritualized cruelty and inhumanity" (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*), the child David could not conform: he had been regarded, therefore, as a "mollycoddle" by his sportsman grandfather. After he had assisted a slave to escape, he had been shipped abroad until people forgot. He had enjoyed the love of women but had lost the girl who might have brought him happiness; he was trapped by the rules of propriety into marrying a girl whom he did not love and who didn't love him, he had endured a lifetime of marriage, begotten children, fought dutifully in the civil war and won recognition in his profession. Yet none of these had he desired. Even in his later years as a widower, when he had wished to marry again, he had been restrained by the knowledge that he could not hurt the women of his family who depended upon him.

General Archbald, the man who “made a good living by putting an end to himself”, embodies the “struggle of personality against tradition and the social background” (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*) that Glasgow claimed was the theme of her three tragicomedies of manners. David Archbald had wished to be a poet in a time and place which never tolerated poetry except in calf-bound volumes bearing the names of foreign authors. He is “a humanitarian in a society which cultivated cruelty and insensitivity as fine art and provided cock-fighting for the lower orders and fox-hunting for ladies and gentlemen” (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*). As a sheltering and sheltered gentleman, “he lives in a society in which woman pretends to obey but actually gently and inexorably dominates” (Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*). As General Archbald in old age reflects upon his life, he is wise, yet not all wise; sadly weary, yet not embittered. In the most consuming affections of his old age- his love for Jenny Blair and for Eva Birdsong- General Archbald has not been able to escape the illusions of his class: he could not dispel the myths of Jenny Blair’s youthful innocence nor of Eva’s imperishable beauty. Yet David Archbald is that rarest creature, whether gentleman or commoner, the civilized man. Although Ellen Glasgow created a number of such men, General Archbald may offer her most perfect embodiment of this concept.

Jenny Blair’s childish admiration for George Birdsong becomes a passionate infatuation as she nears womanhood. Living in her own world of fancy she believes that while adoring the ailing Eva she can love George and receive his attention without hurting anyone. She enjoys keeping the secret of Mr. Birdsong. Eva becomes ill, endures a hysterectomy and a long convalescence, and the shadow of her former beauty still faintly visible, returns to Queenborough.

Thus the rhythmic curve of *The Sheltered Life* rises from the first quite movements of the opening passages in ‘The Age of make-Believe’, through the gradually increasing intensity of ‘The Deep Past’ to the final action of ‘The Illusion’ one may realize the “emotional force of this movement in the suffering,

frustration and loss” which comes to it’s culminating stroke as Eva Birdsong sits motionless with a gun at her feet. George is dead and Jenny Blair feels helpless while crying that she didn’t mean anything. She unknowingly falls a victim of the vicious cycle of the circumstances that leave her nowhere. Finally the masterpiece ends in a tragedy depicting the loss of the protagonist who is left behind to suffer eternally, leaving the readers devastated over the tragedy.

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