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A Critical Survey of Ellen Glasgow's *Virginia*

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Abstract

Ellen Glasgow, an American woman novelist, is well known for her novels on the South. Her strong intellect led her to a conscious channeling of her creative energies towards the making of a substantial body of fiction. Many of Glasgow's novels examine life and values in the State of Virginia of her time. *Virginia* is one of her famous novels where she has successfully depicted the story of self-emancipation of a young woman instructed both at home and in a proper finishing school about her behavior in a male dominated society. The present paper presents a critical survey of *Virginia* with its main focus on the portrayal of women characters and their miserable status in the society.

Keywords

Conflict, Southern Society, *Virginia*, Ellen Glasgow.



Ellen Glasgow enlarged her gallery of Southern female portraits in *Virginia* (1913). Although *Virginia* of every class, and stature had come under her scrutiny, she had already evinced special interest in the lady. She concentrated upon the forms and lives of Southern aristocratic womanhood and upon the forces which created the 'ideal lady' exemplified by Virginia Pendleton of *Virginia*.

Virginia reveals the lives not only of the Pendletons and the Treadwells in Dinwiddie but especially of Virginia, the protagonist of the story. She is a child of the Reverend and Mrs. Gabriel Pendleton. Nurtured in Southern Victorian traditions, Virginia marries Oliver Treadwell, nephew of old Cyrus Treadwell, the financial master of the town. Like other females of her family she also believes in the institution of marriage and motherhood. Thus soon after her marriage she bears three children and devotes her life to them. She is not only a caring mother but also a supporting wife to her husband. With the passage of time Oliver and Virginia go away from each other. Oliver, who is intellectually and emotionally shallow, turns to his dramatic activity and gets involved with an actress.

Virginia's mental growth had ceased at her marriage and owing to her miserable conditions she grows old before her time. She not only grows old physically, but also the same is reflected in her dressing, manners and mental attitude. She fails to understand why her husband had ceased to love her, her daughters pity her, and her son, Harry is not at all interested in what she thinks or feels. Virginia is doomed in her attempt to win back her husband, Oliver from the charm of his actress-mistress. Defeated she returns to Dinwiddie and a meaningless existence in which her only hope is the prospect of her son's return.

Virginia Pendleton and her mother symbolize the ideal of the Southern women who live within their self-created shell, looking towards a futile future in which the institutions of love, marriage and motherhood define the limits of their existence. Virginia, at twenty, lives in a bright haze of emotions; her mother exists in clouds darkened by sorrow but no less emotional. Mrs. Pendleton who led a happy and content life, 'she too ceases to exist physically because she has died emotionally,' after the actor dies. For Virginia too, life had meaning only in the love of her husband. When she realizes that Oliver no longer cares for her, she isolates herself from others.

Mrs. Treadwell and her daughter Susan present contrasting portraits. Mrs. Treadwell had married Cyrus in haste and spent the rest of her life regretting for it. Cyrus who can love only money, has long ago ceased to regard his wife, except with contempt. He had betrayed her by his affair with a black servant, Mandy,

who bore him a son. Mrs. Treadwell lives out meaningless life in peevish frustration; she is pitiable and despicable as well.

Susan Treadwell offers a contrasting picture to Virginia Pendleton as well as her own parents. Though she is not as lovely as Virginia, she is physically strong, intelligent, and possessed a common sense and strength of will. Virginia, living in a mist of ill-defined idealism is suffocated by life; Susan, who is highly intellect and highly emotional, achieves a life of meaning and substantial happiness.

Virginia is Ellen Glasgow's portrait of a Virginian lady by name Virginia in the days of her terrifying perfection: and the men in this novel stand in relation to this pathetic paragon. The Reverend Gabriel Pendleton complements the blind idealism of his wife; for both of these people have lived upright lives guided by a code of manners confused with a religion which dictated that one must always seek the 'true view' and never admits the presence of evil. Only Gabriel Pendleton's innate manhood saves him from the vacuity of many others of his time and profession. As he had fought in the war, so he fights again in defense of a tormented young black-man and dies for what he believes right.

Cyrus Treadwell is Ellen Glasgow's 'acid delineation of a southern man of money.' Physically repulsive, Cyrus is even more repellant as a personality; but to the ladies and gentlemen of Dinwiddie, Cyrus is a 'great many.' Wondrously cutting is the irony with which Glasgow shows how the ladies of the town bow before this 'mammon of unrighteousness' simply because he has achieved wealth. In Cyrus Treadwell is personified the 'southern idols of riches.' Ladies and gentlemen for whom everything Cyrus meant should have been hateful, bowed before his material success.

Ironic, too, is the blacks' role in *Virginia*, that of both tyrant and victim: tyrant in Aunt Docia, the Pendleton's cook: victim in Mandy and her son. Aunt Docia once a slave in Mrs. Pendleton's family, rules the household; and because she cannot be turned out, she tyrannizes everyone. Mandy, a black servant and the 'victim of an evil system' and its aftermath, had been used by Cyrus to satisfy his physical urges. When Mrs. Treadwell had discovered the situation, she had

turned the girl out of the house - possibly the 'one decisive act in her life of defeat'. When Mandy seeks old Cyrus' help in saving their son from the law's exactions for killing a white policeman, his only reaction is annoyance. For the existence of his son he feels no responsibility whatsoever.

Oliver Treadwell has an effect on Virginia: the inspiration of her youthful infatuation; the father of her children, who are never more than biologically his; the husband who has ceased to be aware of her except as a part of her furniture of her life; 'the selfish, thoughtless but not malicious male who uses her youth, then cast her aside.' Yet Oliver is no villain; he lacks the force for villainy. He is 'a shallow, well-meaning but entirely selfish male.' The plays with which he achieves success and which he despises as trash are really the only sort of drama of which he is capable. Perhaps Oliver's shallowness is a measure of Virginia's 'own lack of depth, intellectually and emotionally,' for to her he seems all that is excellent and desirable.

The education provided Virginia Pendleton and other girls of her generation was personified in Miss Priscilla Battle, the mistress of the Academy where Virginia, Susan, and other young ladies of Dinwiddie went through what was mistakenly thought to be education. It was '...founded upon the simple theory that the less a girl know about life, the better prepared she would be to contend with it'. Knowledge of any sport (except the rudiments of reading and writing, the geography of countries she would never mention) was kept from her as rigorously as if it contained the germs of a contagious disease. And this ignorance of anything that could possibly be useful to her was supposed in some mysterious way to add to her value as a woman and to make her a more desirable companion to a man who, either by experience or by instinct, was expected 'to know his world.'

Virginia is a susceptible victim of this ironically ludicrous thwarting of human instinct. Susan who asks questions even if she cannot always receive answers, escapes its worst effects. Susan desires college education but only Cyrus refuses it to her partly because he does not see any value in education for

woman but chiefly because he is incapable of a generous act to one of his own family.

The characterization of Virginia developed from memories of the author's mother, especially with respect to her 'sweetness,' her enduring trouble, her self-sacrifice for her children and even her appearance. The novelist also drew upon her own experience when she wrote of the training of the young girl. 'The book is an expression of Ellen Glasgow's rejection of the older definitions of the lady's role'- as she had observed them- and 'her pitying scorn for their stultifying effects'. These are represented by Virginia who, as a wife, could not share her husband's life other than to provide him physical comforts. 'Ironically, in an age which only denied only prosperity of sexual charges, she has been able to satisfy only these'. Physical involvements or illness or health defined Virginia's awareness of her family's welfare. Oliver's need for sympathetic understanding when his play failed, she could not comprehend; furthermore, his need for privacy was equally incomprehensible to her. 'Formed in an inflexible mold, no strange ideas or liberating energies could ever penetrate her being'. She had learned to believe that 'what she experienced was 'happiness' as long as the code of beautiful behavior was never violated'.

Throughout *Virginia* failure of imagination explains the lives of the characters. Virginia's lack of imagination alienated her husband and children and left her desolate. Ironically, this same deficiency may have tempered the pain of her desolation. Susan, on the other hand, with an alert, inquiring mind, suffered disappointments courageously but also found happiness that was more than vague 'sweetness'. In old Cyrus, the lack of imagination created a monster; he lost the power to imagine anything unless it involved money; only his affection for Gabriel Pendleton made him human at all.

In *Virginia* Ellen Glasgow moved closer to the treatment of Southern character which later distinguished some of her best fiction. Her indictment of the culture which produced but also destroyed the old-fashioned lady may be read as a tragic-comedy of morals and manners. The characters arouse pity and regret before the waste of human living, concomitants of tragedy. Yet this book

is not tragic, for Virginia and the others who suffer simply endure; they do not act. Virginia is pathetic; but because she neither sees nor understands, she does not attain tragic stature. *Virginia* was one of Ellen Glasgow's favorite novels, writing to Allen Tate in 1923 she said,

Virginia is the incarnation of an ideal, and the irony is directed, not at her, but at human nature which creates an ideal only to abandon it when that ideal comes to flower. She was not a weak character, but her vision was that of the heart. Her strength was the strength of selfless devotion. (Rouse 113)

Moreover, Ellen Glasgow wove into the book Euripi dean laughter through the irony which points up scene and character. The comic vision – which, like the tragic, refuses to be blinded by sentimentality or to be overcome by despair – inspires this novel.

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