



Legacy of Southern Decadence: A Critical Study of Ellen Glasgow's Writings

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to deal with the legacy of decadence in the American South by Ellen Glasgow. It would be relevant and useful to examine this in the light of world decadence. The image of decadence or the theme of general decadence may give the impression of an optical illusion. Glasgow with a wide and varied experience presents the geographical, sociological and historical pictures of her region and deals with the decadence that cankered the Old South right from the Civil War onwards. In order to portray their vision of decadent life, Glasgow has mythologized the past and has made it a metaphor ready to be used as a means of understanding and evaluating the present. Glasgow presents historically the deterioration in Southern life and chronicles the decline of the Old South and the rise of the New. Like the social drama, the human drama of her novels includes not just the truth of historical event and human condition, but the truth of setting.

Keywords: Decadence, American South, Civil War, landscape, Nature

Introduction: Southern writers are in a peculiarly advantageous position to present the decadence in setting because historically and temperamentally they had a sense of the concreteness of life and a sense of place. Ellen Glasgow, who is rooted in the Southern soil, makes the best use of setting to present a decadent picture of the American South. Her novels present a microcosm in a macrocosm of worldview. Through decadent setting, a sense of verisimilitude and a realistic accuracy are achieved. The element of place made the fictional lie a reality and helped to give a distinct form to inward movements of thought and emotion already present in the characters. She makes use of the land as a communication of their felt sense of the decadent life of the people of their regions. They make use of the landscape as a metaphor for the- conditions of the souls of their characters, and use it as an objective correlative. The inner and outer worlds - the landscape and the souls of the participants are closely bonded.

Material and Methods

Glasgow makes use of decadent setting to heighten her depiction of decadence. She makes use of natural setting for her characters and her novels are often reminiscent of his in tone, texture, and conception. She is able to draw upon nature to underline effectively the minds and spirits of her characters. In her novels she gives us a clear picture of the decadence and disruption of the South after the Civil War and presents the inward crumbling of the Society. This decadent vision of the South impelled Glasgow to use greater degrees of mysticism and craftsmanship in

her creation of setting. In "Toward a Perfect Place: Setting in the Early Novels of Ellen Glasgow," Dorothy Kish points out,

In most of her (Glasgow's) novels... the settings, a fusion of fact and fancy, have the ring of truth and the radiance of artistic imagination. Whether set in kitchen, drawing-room, or fields of broomsedge, the stories are the more compelling for the vibrancy of the place description. (37)

Glasgow felt that the Southern quality existed unmistakably in the unhurried fascination with surfaces, and therefore she is preoccupied with the decadent setting in which her characterization revealed itself. The pervading symbol in *Barren Ground* is the perpetual broomsedge that is spreading everywhere, over what is once good farm land but now falling out of cultivation because of the Civil War. The land becomes, for Glasgow's characters, the birth place and burial ground of hopes, desires, and disappointments. The land becomes a metaphor for Glasgow's literary art. She recreates a decadent country scene, a disintegrated landscape and deserted lands and populates them with homely figures who grow ruggedly out of the earth, their identities often apparent in their names - Oakley, Burr, Spade, Berry, Bottom and Timberlake.

To know another (or oneself), one must know the land, the family, and the forebears. Born and raised during the time that Richmond is recovering from the Civil War, Glasgow learned from living in the city, the romantic myth of the South. The period between the end of the Civil War and the coming of First World War is the time when the citizens are faced with the task of repairing the ravage of War-rebuilding a major portion of the city which had been burned - but they are also forced to construct a new social order under which they could rebuild both their lives and their livelihood. This is the period of Reconstruction and during those unsettling years, the situation and setting in the South are so decadent and ruinous that they influenced Southerners like Glasgow and forced them to choose for their setting, the region they know best.

Glasgow's ambition is to create works of art by portraying her characters against the milieu with which she is herself so closely identified. In the prefaces which Glasgow wrote to her novels, she seeks to justify them on the grounds of their truthfulness - the settings had been visited, the occupations observed, the characters drawn from actual persons. It is a state of mind, a social attitude, a mythic symbol as well as a geographical place. Therefore, Glasgow is interested in its decay. But she also took into account the town's concomitant industrial growth, the factories and railroads, their smells, strikes, financial crises and the loss of the tradition, manners and patriarchal code of the South. Glasgow uses setting to convey the poignancies of the end of an era.

Glasgow has not written of Virginia life but of human life in *Virginia*. Absence of light and a bleak winter season in *Virginia*, mean that Virginia is no longer an energetic embodiment of the Life Force with which, as a young girl, she is so perfectly in harmony. In *Virginia* the loss of love and the fading of beauty keep pace with the rotting of the paulownia trees which have been previously associated in Virginia's mind with her once overpowering happiness. When Virginia returns

heartbroken from New York, she learns that the wife of the present Rector-wants to cut down the tree. After Virginia's return, "Though she is not yet thirty, the delicate, and flowerlike bloom of her beauty is already beginning to fade" (259). Virginia's slow decline in beauty achieves pathos from such incremental emphasis.

Glasgow turns from the urban setting of Richmond, to the rural setting of Queenborough in her novels of manners, to examine the predicament of man in our time and to create the image of decadence through setting. She places her characters in her Tidewater South and examines them in that decadent setting so as to render credibility of character and action. We must never forget that Southern decadence is a legacy of the Civil War. The spectacle of the South after the War is dismal and disheartening. Law and order gave way to looting and shooting by armed desperadoes. It is interesting to note how Glasgow employs sensory images to heighten her decadent setting. In *The Miller of Old Church*, she utilizes the sensory rural images to harmonize with the motions of her characters, or else to contrast ironically with them. The countryside is presented at different seasons to complement fully the ranges of feeling of decadence expressed in the novel. The land is projected as being cruel to those who do not adjust to its stern demands.

Decadence in setting is also discernible in the plantations and in the landscape. The broomsedge, the eternal enemy of the farmer, engulfs every new farm and field. The plantations are in many places overgrown with weeds. The fields shrink and become smaller and smaller and grass grows over the furrows, covering the wheel tracks. The good land lies fallow beneath the sun while the mules stand idle in their pastures for there are no longer people to work for. Southern writers in general and Glasgow in particular, under the inescapable influence of soil upon soul, are aware of the interaction of the soil upon the Southern farmers, their lives and their fortunes; Glasgow in her novels shows the close relationship between the characters and their regions. In *Life and Gabriella*, so ironically titled, the characters resent the effluvia of industrial "progress" which had invaded their once-fashionable neighbourhood, but they do not recognize the more blighting presence of false sentiment in the midst of which they gasp and struggle.

Glasgow is fond of the decaying house symbol to depict the external decadence that is prevalent in the South. The same decadent house symbol is found in *Life and Gabriella*, where the Archbalds and the Birdsongs, sing a swan-song and are silent, passive spectators of change and decay. The external decadence in setting is once more revealed by Glasgow in the form of a ruined house in *This is Our Life*. Asa Timberlake's grandfather's house is an old house in a dilapidated condition. It is deserted and the wreckers are at work on the white columns. The wreckers are at work on this house and Asa reflects that the old house is going out with its age, with its world, with its manners, with its fashion in architecture. In *This is Our Life* Glasgow is deeply involved and wrote with an added dimension and with a universal rhythm deeper than any material surface. She affirms that beneath the lights and shadows, there is the brooding spirit of place, but, deeper-still beneath the spirit of place, there is the whole movement of life.

Vein of Iron documents the passing of a sterner epoch that of the country people from whom the Glasgows descended. The author explores family memory,

reaching back to the pioneers of Rockbridge Country in the Valley of Virginia. Covering the years 1901 to 1933, this novel takes its main characters from Ironside village to the city of Queenborough and back. The opening of the novel creates a strong sense of place. Each character in the novel engages in an interior monologue, a reverie that dissolves time and space and contributes to the web of family lore. The novel presents the effect of the Great Depression on the Fincastle family. In 1918, the Fincastles find themselves in a rundown neighbourhood in Queenborough. When Ralph McBride and Ada marry, misfortunes multiply; Ralph suffers a car accident and takes to drinking and philandering while Ada, drained of energy, with aching, swollen feet, works as a saleswoman to support her husband and her son Ranny. First World War also had a tremendous impact on the lives of the people. Mrs. McBride, who represents the Ironside has a sadistic pleasure in sacrificing her son to the cause of the war. The War reduced many farmers to a state of beggary and penury. The starving, impoverished people stood on the doorsteps of the alms houses.

Glasgow laments the decline of morality, the deterioration of the city and of the region, and the imminent global war because they are all aspects of one downward movement. She weaves into the very texture of *Life and Gabriella* the sickly, all-pervasive odour and tries to establish its tone throughout the novel. The April wind blowing wildly over the clover and grass as George and Jenny are first attracted toward each other is one more sign of the unrestrained primitive feeling which draws them together. The Birdsong garden, which is once rank and luxuriant, but gone to seed at the end of the novel, connotes not only the decline of Eva and the aristocracy she represents, but also the wild, lawless nature of Jenny Blair. When Jenny comes back from her vacation in the mountains, she sees a blown curtain at an upper window of the Birdsong home sucked back into the room; it is symbolic of Jenny being drawn back into the vortex of her dangerous passion for George. After Eva interrupts the lover's embrace at the close of the novel, the evil odour is so pronounced as to become associated with the corruption in the depths of human nature itself.

The events of *This is Our Life* cover a little over a year, from April 1938 to August 1939, just before Second World War. The Timberlakes have fallen on hard times and are caught between their past pretensions of wealth and status and the present reality of limited means, illness, and family strife. Asa Timberlake represents the last of Glasgow's civilized men with any sense of an aristocratic heritage. A menial in a tobacco factory, he feels at fifty-eight, "as insecure ... as a drying leaf on a stem" (121). The novel's atmosphere is decadent. The catastrophic effect of the pre-Second World War period on the lives of the characters is very evident in this novel "They breathe forth an air of nerveless impotence, dejection, and self-pity, thus creating an impression of unreliability" (79). An air of illness prevails over the whole novel. Lavinia's invalid existence her demands on Asa to serve her as a nurse, Peter's suicide and Old William's cancer suggest the odour of decay and dissolution. Glasgow suggests a sick society through Lavinia, who has learned how to use her pseudo-invalidism as a weapon. All the characters breathe a miasma, a foul air, peculiar not only to their lives but also to the American society.

Thus, Nature plays a crucial role in the fiction of Glasgow who makes use of

decadent setting as a background to their world. Nature exerts conscious or unconscious influence on their characters. Its influence is all pervasive and so predominant that they become pictures to the blind and music to the deaf. She, apart from externalizing their own states are also trying through the medium of the South, to anatomize human nature, chart in their plan of their particular regions for the soul is wedded to the soil; no one can or would separate them. The human drama is played out in the awful presence of living nature. The scenery and landscape are intensely suggestive of the loss of Arcadian peace, loveliness, simplicity and beauty where the characters breathe an unwholesome air and their human relations are tangled. Their rural world of wide distances, energetic and open natures, hearty and honest enjoyments, calm, peaceful and leisurely lives are vitiated by the hostile and heterogeneous world of towns and cities.

Glasgow has the familiar, physical and cultural, Southern setting - the red clay farms, the cotton fields, the hills and forests, the primitive farm houses, the small hamlets with their post offices, general stores, cafes, court houses, banks, churches, public institutions and porches for depicting Southern decadence. Their characters are the sons and daughters of the Southern soil comprising a wide variety of classes and types of people - Whites and Negroes, farmers and town-folk, professional and business people, landowners and sharecroppers, Methodists and Baptists. Glasgow is a party to all this, mixing and sharing in the life of the Southern community.

Conclusion: This paper aims to deal with the legacy of decadence in Ellen Glasgow's writings. The Southern setting or the Southern scene is only that small piece of the large human scene upon which several writers look from various windows or apertures of the house of fiction. Every one of these windows has been pierced in its vast front, by the need of the individual vision and by the pressure of the individual will. At each window stands a figure with a pair of eyes or at least with a field glass. The individual creative mind, personality, experience, selects and moulds the common clay to produce an original body of fiction.

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