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“Failing the Men in Glasgow’s *The Sheltered Life*”

Ellen Glasgow Journal of Southern Women Writers Vol.2. (2009): 55-85.

Emmeline GROS

RESUME:

En s’intéressant ici au point de vue masculin, cette étude met en évidence une oscillation entre un discours qui vise à rassembler autour d’une norme hégémonique de masculinité (ou de performance masculine)—un discours du même—et un discours qui vise à la différence masculine—un discours d’altérité, d’absence, ou de marginalité. Au sein même de cette dynamique, semblent alors se profiler des alternatives intéressantes, des modèles de masculinité subordonnés, déviants, voire innovants. Pour autant, comme le suggère cette étude, une masculinité en crise ne signifie pas un idéal de masculinité en mutation. Il s’agit alors d’interroger l’effet paradoxal d’un discours d’altérité qui se trouve lui-même altéré et de montrer comment dans un contexte de dissolution d’une identité régionale forte (le Vieux Sud), les frontières (entre norme et contre-norme, centre et périphérie, Nord et Sud, milieu rural et industrialization) tentent de se ré-inscrire au niveau identitaire, en particulier dans les rapports de genre (identité sexuée).

ABSTRACT:

This paper, in the spirit of recent scholarship on Southern Studies, aims at a reclamation of Southern masculine heterogeneity via challenges to what scholars have referred to as the (normative) myth of the Southern Gentleman. This study examines the rhetoric of male stereotypes in Southern culture, observes scenarios in which these stereotypes create ‘internal’ and ‘external’ others and explores the ways in which these images promote prejudice, classism and gender disparities and also deny the existence of richly diverse “deviant” or “regenerative” masculine identities within the reconstructed South.

Keywords: Masculinity, Gender Studies, Glasgow, Femininity, Subverting Identity Performance, Contesting prescribed identity constructions.

PAPER:

Set in the town of Queenborough from 1906 to the eve of the First World War, Ellen Glasgow's *The Sheltered Life* (1932) dramatizes the crisis of the two remaining "good families" in Washington Street, the Archbalds and the Birdsongs. When the book begins, the old patriarch of the Archbald household, General David Archbald is seventy-six. In the aftermath of the Civil War, he lives in a handsome, dignified house on Washington Street, with Etta and Isabella, his two daughters, Cora the wife of his dead son, and his young granddaughter, Jennie Blair. Near the Archbalds lives George Birdsong, a middle-class lawyer and his ravishingly beautiful wife Eva, the reigning belle of Queenborough society during the 1890s.

In this fictionalized version of Richmond, both families represent the last stalwart symbols of the old Southern order who struggle to ignore the demise of southern traditions and values under the pressures of moral decay and the capitalist modernization that manifests itself in the strong chemical stench that comes from a factory nearby. Auchincloss aptly notes that the smell is not only "the modern world that threatens them from without, but also a reminder of the decadence that attacks them from within," (79) what White describes as "the apperception of a shape of social life grown old" (142). Unaware (or willingly oblivious) of the changes around them, they cling to a dream of the past that has died, just as decaying Belles like Eva Birdsong cling to their memories of past glories. This society has become stagnant and ingrown [because it] "blindly holds to past ideals and past rules of conduct while the future knocks at the door" (Manning 300). The group, to use White's terms, has lost "its power to locate itself in history, to come to grips with the Necessity that its past represents for it, and to imagine a creative, if only provisional transcendence of its fate" (148-149).

As the narrator emphasizes:

Ever since the War between the States had transformed opulent planters into eminent citizens, a dozen old country families had clung to the lower end of Washington Street. Here they had lived; knit together by ties of kinship and tradition, in the Sabbath peace that comes only to those who have been vanquished in war. Here they resisted change and adversity and progress; and here at last they were scattered by nothing more tangible than a stench...Only the Archbalds and the Birdsongs... stood their ground and watched the invasion of ugliness (Glasgow 6).

In this new era, the decline of the old-landed aristocratic South is inevitable. Yet, if the "signs of modernization indicate that [Glasgow] is portraying the South at a time of change, the novel's action does not rest on a conflict between the old and new ages. [. . .] Rather than changing times, Glasgow's focus here is the Old South tradition itself... enforced by a strict code of behavior [that] stunt

individuals” (Manning 302). As Manning remarks, the Archbald’s walled garden, in particular, symbolizes the family’s attempt to hold at bay the new order and to make time still (301).

In that regard, all the inhabitants of Washington street try to celebrate the remnants of the old order: “still undaunted, the two families held the breach between the old and the new order, sustained by pride and by some moral quality more enduring than pride. After all, they might have asked, were they not defending their homes from a second invasion?” (7). And it is the allegorical figuration or appropriation of the body, more specifically the female body, which becomes a possibility for the meaningful transformation of history, and thus a successful example of what Jameson, paraphrasing Karl Marx, names “the collective struggle to wrest a real of freedom from a real of necessity” (31).

Not surprisingly, Carol S. Manning’s afterword, for instance, focuses almost entirely on the female body in Glasgow’s fiction. Through special attention to Eva Birdsong and to the burden of cult of beauty in the beautiful woman (304), to Etta Archbald, “the woman who lacks beauty” and who cannot win any man, or to Cora Archbald who has “assumed the role of the society’s other, more sedate ideal of womanhood” (307) and who believes that appearance “matters [. . .] more than anything in the world,” some critics (Manning included) have justly interpreted *The Sheltered Life* as Glasgow’s attempting to bitterly expose the evils of the cult of the womanly woman (or true womanhood), a male-defined ideal which cripples the women’s lives and aspirations by representing the woman’s actions as artificial and the woman’s body (and most specifically the Southern Belle’s body) as a collective artifact rather than as an individual body. Eva, we hear, is “still regarded less as a woman than as a memorable occasion” (7).

Of course, this interpretation should not come as a surprise, for times of crisis, as Hilda Smith remarks, work to reinforce this understanding of the cult of true womanhood.¹ The transformation of the economy and the elaboration of a public male sphere depend, as Smith explains, on the parallel creation of a female sphere within the home, which becomes a males’ haven of retreat from a hostile and competitive environment. The cult of genteel behavior means that these women conform to male ideals of femininity and in turn, abandon all true sense of self. Eva Birdsong is one perfect example of this female tragedy. Like her canary, Ariel, she is imprisoned in a cage, as she reflects:

“I sometimes wonder,” she said,”if it is fair to keep a single bird, even a canary, in a cage. If I let him out, what would become of him?” “He would fly away. You would never find him again.” “Yes, when a bird flies away, you never find him again.” (285)

Living in a cage according to the society’s expectations of women (Manning 321) also means that

¹ For a detailed analysis of Cora Archbald, refer to Carol S. Manning’s afterword to Glasgow’s *The Sheltered Life*. ² The doctrine of true womanhood, or the Angel of the House was adopted from the Victorian era. According to this belief and in a public world of fierce competition, Southern gentlemen could find peace and comfort from the public arena in the privacy of the house (the women’s sphere). The Angel was passive and powerless, meek, charming, graceful, sympathetic, self-sacrificing, pious, and above all--pure.

women exist as projections of the male gaze, suggesting that, in the power relationships rooted in gender, the male gaze win. Eva Birdsong, in particular, corresponds to this ideal. She is, according to Manning, “frozen in the role of the Southern belle, expected [by men] to be forever young, vivacious, and beautiful” (307).

On Washington Street however, the female sphere, we quickly realize, offers but a solace from the social and economic anxieties of the PostBellum South. To the contrary, in this male-female system of interaction, not all women seem ready to accept the docile role of the plantation-Belle. The women may, at times, seem to be keeping to their place, i.e. inside the house, yet on closer acquaintance, women (especially the younger generation) turn into rebels.³ Jenny Blair Archbald, for instance, reads traditional guides to the good rules for the perfect lady, such as *Little Women*, yet reading (an activity usually linked to the more private sphere of domesticity) has become a public display of appearances. Archbald’s granddaughter, we are told, reads only for “the assured reward of a penny a page” (3). We understand that among the social and political transformations of the Postbellum South, we must include a profound disruption of patriarchy and a profound sense of male anxiety.

This sense of anxiety is clear from even a cursory look at the narrative: married to a woman he did not love because of appearances and now, a widower who has been denied the possibility of remarrying because his daughters and daughter-in-law expected him to remain loyal to his wife’s memory, Archbald realizes that he has lived “in an age when marriage was an invisible prison” and that his own marriage was “thirty years of heroic fidelity” during which “he had sacrificed his youth, his middle age, his dreams, his imagination, all the vital instincts that make a man, to the moral earnestness of tradition” (Glasgow 33, qtd. in Manning 303). “For forty years,” we are told, “General Archbald had tried in vain to keep the library for his own use; but there had always been the dread that a closed door might hurt somebody’s feelings. Now Mrs. Archbald’s workbag of flowered silk lay on his [the General’s] desk, with the contents of bright scraps and spools scattered over his blotting pad” (179). The women not only invade the males’ space but they also open the door to a changing economy, to the commercial interests that, after the Civil War, penetrated the rural South.

In Glasgow’s South, no domestic space, we discover, has been kept for the males’ relaxation, and the house is no longer a haven. By revising the Southern home and by alluding that Southern women might only pretend to abide by the rules of ideal femininity, Glasgow redraws the boundaries of the drawing room and portrays the males as ineffectual figures of authority and leadership. No longer able to control his actions, even less the actions of his daughters and grand-daughter, the patriarch of the old landed aristocracy, the General, is often confined to a chair and is mostly

portrayed in the garden, tending to Dandelions.² George Birdsong is repeatedly—as his family name suggests--caged in his house, or brought back *homeward*, according to Eva's demand. Each in his own particular way has yielded power over women, both emotionally and physically.

Of course, it could be easy to lay the blame on the New Industrial South³ or, even, on the women. Because they are often castrating in their demands, because “one woman after another had enslaved his [the General's] sympathy,” (105) women can indeed be regarded as the cause for the males' anxieties and failures. However, and as this paper will suggest, the males' failures and anxieties reveal that it is the male body, rather than the female body, which becomes the object of a collective appropriation, for the stories and narratives “contained” or “dissimulated” within the male body could endorse strategies for the re- interpretation or reconfiguration of a utopian narrativization of history and thus, endanger the narrative conventionality of patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, and Southern Romance.

The term “Patriarchy,” as defined by scholars, usually encompasses “the rule of the father, including the rule of older men over younger men and of fathers over daughters, as well as husbands over wives” (Ehrenreich 284) and so defined, patriarchy seems to be precisely what does not function in *The Sheltered Life*. If the title he carries suggests that this General should be patriarch, Glasgow emphasizes that this man is not even qualified for the job. Archbald's patriarchal failure, we discover, lies precisely in his inability to pass what John Stoltenberg names “the test of loyalty to manhood” (1), a rite of passage which qualifies southern males for hegemonic masculinity and dominance over subordinate groups (non- whites, non-southern, etc).

As he recalls his early years, the General revisits the narrative of masculinity that has been transmitted to him from his grandfather who assured him “that hunting had given greater pleasure to a greater number of human beings than all the poetry since Homer” (108). To the deception of his grandfather, the General was not a hunter, for “the sight of blood sickened him.” Instead, he “saw visions in the night and wanted to be a poet” (108). “Different,” controlled by fear of his grandfather's power and of the “little girls [who] were as savage as boys” (108), Archbald comes to realize that “from his earliest childhood [. . .] he had been the victim of pity, of his own pity” (105). Since “[p]ity, said the men who had none, is a woman's virtue” (108) the General's traumatic childhood (and construction of masculinity) reminds us of the rigidity of conventional gender forms.⁵ If neither melancholy nor reflection is expected of men, a man who exhibits either is immediately feminized.

² In her autobiography, *The Woman Within* (1954), Glasgow reports that she became a rebel at an early age: « I cannot recall the time when the pattern of society, as well as the scheme of things in general, had not seemed to me false and even malignant » (Glasgow *The Woman Within* 42, qtd.in Manning 298).

³ The defense of the Old South recurs frequently in the novels of the period. Composed a couple of years before *The Sheltered Life*, the collection of essays *I'll Take my Stand* defends the Old South's agrarian way of life against the encroaching industrialization of the modern age.

Because they were deemed “unmanly,” these activities even led people to call “him a milksop” (108). If as Connell argues, one of the weapons in the ongoing struggle to maintain hegemony is “a rich vocabulary of abuse: wimp, milksop, nerd ...sissy, lily liver, jellyfish, yellow belly, candy ass,” and so forth, then, we must understand that Archbald, in this instance, is not only accused of effeminacy but also implicitly challenged to claim (or reclaim) his southern manhood.

In this sense, the General’s masculinity is portrayed as stigmatized, marked by childhood trauma. The title of the section of the book, *The Deep Past*, is significant here. Michael Warner reminds us that stigma [...] marked the person, not the deed, as tainted. [...] It is a kind of ‘spoiled identity’ [which ...] befalls one like fate. Like the related stigmas of racial identity or disabilities, it may have nothing to do with acts one has committed. It attaches not to doing, but to being; not to conduct, but to status” (27-28). Of course, attempting to deny one’s patriarchal heritage would be futile for, in this Southern community, masculinity is precisely a matter of status. We learn, for instance, that the grandfather “belonged to the Georgia school of Gentleman” (109). The young Archbald understands rapidly that he must take on his father’s identity that is itself merely borrowed from previous fathers or ideas of fathers.⁴In psychoanalytic terms, we have no choice but to repeatedly enact our stories: identity is repetition compulsion. Therefore, Archbald gives up all resistance and decides to make-believe that he is not a reader of poetry, because “he knew that there were eyes somewhere among the leaves, and that these eyes, the eyes of the hunted, were watching him” while he was reading Byron’s poetry (116).

Understandably, the masks or personas that he chooses to play are drawn from myths and icons of maleness—the hunter, the woodsman—all perceived as masculine pursuits that have not been or should not be performed by women or by effeminate men. This need to act out masculinity in front of an audience, either men or women, connects to the post feminist idea of gender as a masquerade and as performance rather than as essence. It is worth noting that the mention of the word “eyes” repeated three times in the sentence quoted above adds to the stage-like effect of the scene. The passage here, by revisiting the hunter’s narrative inherited from his ancestors, suggests that the Southern notion of chivalry (and therefore of romance) is indeed produced by the willful manipulation of social decorum.⁵

In the performance of masculinity, we understand that “passing” for a man is the opposite of failing; a

⁴ Carol S. Manning, in her afterword to the novel, alludes to the rigidity of the code, as follows: “Glasgow implies that surfaces are everything to the Old South code: if one is from an acceptable family and acts like a Southern gentleman—if one “fall[s] into the right pattern”—one is a Southern gentleman” (317). ⁶ Going to his hidden place in the forest, General Archbald “had brought clothes taken from the old garments in his father’s and his grandfather’s closets” (110).

⁵ Archbald admits that he has fulfilled the role of the honorable Southern gentleman to perfection but that it has been a life of surfaces, “A surface! Yes, that, he realized now, was the flaw in the structure. Except for that one defeated passion in his youth, he had lived entirely upon the shifting surface of facts. He had been a good citizen, a successful lawyer, a faithful husband, an indulgent father; he had been, indeed, everything but himself. Always he had fallen into the right pattern; but the centre of the pattern was missing” (164).

successful rite of passage, the crossing of a boundary. But to “pass” also means to get away with pretending to be who you are not. The assumed role of the hunter becomes a gender-marked feature that marginalizes effeminate men, “milksops,” poets, and the artists. In this context, the term “man” acquires a set of related negative definitions: man means “not woman,” “not Queer,” “not effeminate.” Glasgow, it seems, plays with a definition of Southern male identity that goes something like “you are who you aren’t.” By featuring this traumatic scene in which the young General’s uncertainty about his masculine role is explicitly linked to the staging of a typically “masculine” performance, Glasgow’s narrative reads as a story of deception, giving us a good instance of how southern masculine hegemony was achieved and sustained.

The “deception” is double, for in the same chapter, the General’s grandfather asks the General’s mother if Archbald was “born lacking?” (109). “‘Not lacking, father,’ his mother protested, ‘but different’” (109). The mother, working conspiratorially with the son, can be seen as a manipulating figure who deceives the patriarch and acquires power through the artful performance of the son she favors. Allied with the maternal, General Archbald is thereby made feminine—or better, brought under maternal control—to perform masculinity, i.e. to become gentleman-able.⁸ Because it is the mother who has staged Archbald’s drama, the son who inherits the narrative future is therefore represented through greater dependence on the mother, greater vulnerability, and comparative smallness. He also has features and feelings (he likes poetry) that would, in later generations, be identified as feminine.

An alternative psychological reading suggests itself: the grandson of the patriarch represents a split self-projection of a father anxious about his masculine identity. Compared with the other young boys’ unbridled masculinity, the young Archbald’s masculinity may indeed represent the threat of the more maternally-allied aspects of the patriarch himself. And indeed, Archbald, by going back to the memories of his childhood, places himself between the past and the present, the then and the now of narrative and revisits the narrative of inherited masculinity. General Archbald himself asks, “[w]as it fair to blame him because he had been born different? Was anybody to blame for the way God had let him be born?” (110). Collier justly remarks that what actually is being addressed in many accounts of hegemonic masculinity is a “range of popular ideologies of what constitute ideal or actual characteristics of “being a man” (841). What is interesting, he adds, is not this model, which is unattainable, but rather the way the young boys and men position themselves in relationship to this collective image: “men can dodge among multiple meanings according to their interactional need. Men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable; but the same men can distance themselves

strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments”.⁶

By going back to his past and by revisiting what happened in the woods (when he was staged by the eyes), it is the incongruity between the epic and the domestic that Archbald emphasizes. The narrative, we could even argue, is therefore ostensibly conceived as a critique of its pretext. By retaining passages from the original version and commenting on their antiquated mannerism, it enacts a conflict of styles and ideologies: fathering or grandfathering becomes a site of struggle in ways illustrating the problematic forging of new kinds of male identities and the difficulties of resolving competing versions--the individual version and the community version--here embodied by the patriarchs of the family, founding father figures who have become the motivating force of Archbald’s masculine narrative. Fatherhood, we understand, becomes the mode in which the value of Southern masculinity is reasserted, and in our case, the importance of fathering (or grandfathering) clearly suggests an attempt at reclamation or re-appropriation of deviant masculine narratives (like the one revisited by the General, for instance) in which paternity is offered as crucial not only to children but also to the continuation of Southern masculinity.

If this patriarchal heritage is so fundamental, if the young Archbald cannot bind past and present together with meaning, the past may just as well die with his grandfather. If, as Peter Brooks argues, “it is at the moment of death that life becomes transmissible,” then *The Sheltered Life* reveals considerable anxiety about the possibility of transmission, not only transmission to the next generation, but also transmission from the previous generation. Archbald is divided in his response to his own past and to his father’s past: on the one hand, he acknowledges the inheritance of his father’s past, but on the other hand, he acknowledges that there is nothing compelling about that past. In the introduction to *Masculinities in Britain since 1800*, Michael Roper and John Tosh argue that, “one of the most precarious moments in the reproduction of masculinity is the transfer of power to the succeeding generation” (17). Commenting on that statement Jonathan Rutherford writes:

The transformation of masculine subjectivities from one generation to the next is not simply an external relationship of social conditioning and role learning between parents and their children. Nor does it constitute a process whose passage of time is then confined to the past. Rather, it becomes an integral part of individual subjectivity, the child of his parents co-existing in a complex, often antagonistic relationship with the adult man. This weak link of the generational exchange of masculine values and practices, the ambivalences, conflicts and contradictions of identity, finds its expression in the structuring and dividing of male psyche (195-96).

⁶ Consequently, “masculinity” represents not a certain type of man but, rather, a way that men position themselves through discursive practices” – therefore, the beau or the southern gentleman should less be discussed as a type or as a given of characteristic traits (slaves, plantation...) but rather as a way to position oneself toward hegemonic masculinity.

Not surprisingly, this “transfer of power” (i.e hegemonic masculinity) from one generation to the next does become a source of tension, for if he is to avoid any breakdown in the hegemonic male narrative that has been passed on for generations, the father (or the older generation) needs to contain the son’s possibly-deviant and “competing version” in a normative and conventional narrative—in Glasgow’s South, the conventionality of Southern Romance. Significantly, there is no “father” in *The Sheltered Life*. We hear about the General’s grandfather; yet, his father is absent. Jenny Blair’s father is also absent from the story, killed while hunting, in turn suggesting that this absence of the father-figure might indeed point at a breakdown in the narrative of white hegemonic masculinity. This absence is reinforced by the grandfather figure, Archbald, who “does not think about how he can make life better for his precious granddaughter, how he can give her better guidance and nurturing than he received in his youth—how he can help her avoid living a life of surfaces [. . .] Never does the reader see him offer Jenny Blair moral guidance or intellectual stimulation. Archbald needs to be much involved in the present, but his thoughts and concerns (not only here but elsewhere in the novel) are much more about Eva Birdsong, the ideal of the Old South” (Manning 318-319).

In Archbald’s example and because it attempts to reconcile a reproductive, strong masculinity with the General’s frail, ineffectual male body, the narrative begins a more or less direct commentary on the limitations patriarchy imposes upon both women and men. Glasgow focuses on the plight of the sons, who are usually confused or oppressed by their fathers or grandfathers, or befuddled by women, and yet who cannot think outside of these traditional relationships, precisely because they are unable to recognize any other alternatives for themselves. In relationship to their past, males like the General express the desire to master the anxiety of its influence.

The obsession with the past, the need to go back to the origin of the trauma represent, to some extent, the men’s desire for an original moment that is believed to lie somewhere within the past. Because they long for a masculinity that is uninfluenced, untouched, i.e. “original,” Glasgow’s men need to explore their roots and immediate creators: their male ancestors. For instance, the General continues to dream that one day, he will be able to shrug off the past and create himself anew.¹⁰ Yet, the General, who lives in a timeless present (where past/present/future coalesce) cannot abandon the present and return to a place where he can recapture the vitality of the original and re-appropriate for himself this body who was once reading poetry but forced to wear the mask of virility. Storytelling may indeed allow him to revisit his memories; yet, it cannot change the stale version of his present situation. Glasgow offers us what Roland Barthes calls a “vertigo of time defeated,” an uncanny and conflicted sense of temporality generated by old photographs of people once alive, but who are now “alive” only in the photos, prompting us to “shudder... over a catastrophe which has already occurred,” because “we feel, with a pang, that the dead have yet to die and that the past has yet to

happen” (96).

The title “General” itself carries great romantic weight, suggesting glorious or doomed struggles. It communicates to the reader not only the male-dominated institution of the army, relying on the subversion and the suppression of identity of its members to a unified corps, but also an image of traditional masculinity that requires a similar repression of difference within the self. The patriarchal institution conforms to a definition—usually reserved for the “peculiar institution of slavery” —as a system of coercion that robs the people of their free will and their identity. Manhood thus necessarily precludes the essential quality—freedom— on which it is taken to be founded. At the heart of Glasgow’s ideology, we discover an assumption that contradicts the idea that fatherhood is a natural fact that, if socially ratified, will convert southern society into a permanent alignment of essential givens (with natural aristocrats, pure women, and sturdy yeoman, all persistently content in their separate fields). In so doing, Glasgow revises the mystery of the all-transcending order of Southern society. One has to *believe* in it.⁷

Yet, it is clear that the males living in Washington Street do *not* believe in it. The narrative goes even further than simply revisiting and questioning the masculine narrative being transmitted from one generation to the next. It also unsettles the traditional conventions of masculinity and patriarchy and comes as an affront to Southern wholeness, for it posits a community without a (male) leader, masculinity without even the desire for what has traditionally been understood as masculinity’s hallmark: power. George Birdsong, for instance, does not want to correspond to the image of manhood that his wife Eva demands. Caught between two models of manhood—the independent individualist and ineffectual husband who keeps a mulatto mistress called Memoria in the lower part of the town and the community man tied into Washington Street wherein he must be husband and provider— George is unable to see or to commit to either fully, as he later admits to the General, “[a]fter all, you can’t make a man bigger than he really is. I know I’m not a big man, and when I come up against anything that is too much for me, beauty, goodness, unhappiness, I give way inside” (197).⁸

Glasgow here explicitly problematizes the notions of authority, power, and patriarchy as the solid foundations that the Archbalds (and the South as a whole) have taken for granted. Ultimately, by portraying a community deprived of any model of strong masculinity— Archbald, for instance, is a

⁷ Glasgow herself argued that, “the glory of men as of nations is measured not by the strength with which they cling to the past, but by the courage with which they adventure into the future ...[Genius] means a departure from tribal forms and images. It means a creation of new standards and new ideals of beauty and new rules of conduct” (*The Dynamic Past* 75)

⁸ Earlier in the novel, George has revealed his most secret desire: “I sometimes wish,” George said desperately, “that she (*Eva Birdsong, his wife*) didn’t believe in me. If she saw me as I am, I might be able to measure up better. But she would idealize me. She expected too much. I always knew it was hopeless” (196) Significantly enough, George (and the couple) does not produce any children, as if to emphasize the complete sterility of what marriage and gender have given him: authority within his own family and the Southern family (and community) as large.

crippled old man, Jennie Blair's father was killed by his desire to hunt, and George is crippled emotionally—Glasgow achieves a transformative revision of Southern patriarchy and empties “Southern masculinity” (and patriarchy) of its essential meaning, in so far as that term has depended upon the males' assumption of the authority in the family and cultural sphere. The General's inability to uphold patriarchy or George's failure to correspond to an image that would satisfy the traditional image of Southern manhood is not so much due to the women who seem to have taken control over them, or to the encroaching of the female sphere onto the public (masculine) one. To the contrary, by showing that Archbald and George's masculine and patriarchal inabilities lie inside (not outside) and by revealing that the men's failure is not so much due to some bad acting on a poorly arranged stage, as it is due to a deeper, inner refusal to act, the narrator raises the possibility that the Southern character may well have no countenance to it, which in turn foregrounds the question of essence in regard to identity: Is there an essence that a man can fall back on when everything has been lost, or is southern masculine identity a performance with no center? Is there not an essence to which male performances might be anchored?

If, as Michael Awkward has suggested, “monolithic and/or normative maleness” is conventionally defined by the “powerful, domineering patriarch,” (3) then a family in which men no longer dominate is a family in which masculinity itself is called into question. Displaced as patriarch and divested of his former dominance, the General's fall from grace takes place in part as a self-revelation and as an exposure to the reader of the inessentiality of all idea of patriarchy and here of masculine power. The question thus remains: can a man really be a man if he no longer possesses—or claims—the power to command? Who might a father become once he is no longer a patriarch, or no longer wants to perform the role? And if, as Martha Fineman suggests, “control, dominance, and independence are quintessentially masculine,” (205) then, how might we reconceive manhood in a way that is not so dependent upon parallel binaries of male/female, strong/weak, potent/impotent, masculine/sissified?

The text here goes beyond the mere representation of an absent father, one who has abdicated from the legitimate seat of patriarchal rule; nor does it portray merely a father inadequately fulfilling the requirements of his assumed rightful identity. Both these possibilities evoke what Sharon Holland, following Hortense Spillers, identifies as “fatherlack”: “the idea of a dream/nightmare deferred [. . .] an inevitable and unattainable fatherhood” (387). Ultimately, Glasgow invites a deeper critical scrutiny, for her conclusion, to use Jenkins' terms, “contains a possibility far more bewildering than the father's absence: a father who is present, but nonetheless no longer dominant or even interested in domination” (972). In so doing, Glasgow demands an entirely new way of defining and understanding gender and male-female interaction, one which begins with men who are men *in spite of* patriarchal

power, not *because* of it.

Moreover, if this “male” authority can be easily discarded, it raises questions about the clear social and gender boundaries that the South established between the real and the unreal, the Southern and the non-Southern, the masculine and the feminine, the enduring and the fading. And, as the narrative clearly shows, these boundaries are rapidly shifting. Wondering, “[w]as it conceivable, as Cora suspected, that Eva knew the truth, and was merely preserving appearances?” the General attempts to re-establish distinct boundaries between “real” and “fake” women, by convincing himself that, “[n]o, he could not believe this” (107). Because she is deemed “beautiful,” “ideal,” and “queenlike,” because her body reads like a text of unaffected purity and transparent legibility, Eva remains unable to exercise her “knowing” subjectivity. This Southern Belle, we understand, must remain fixed in a recognizable (and therefore “universal”) gender role, i.e. the pure, innocent, perfect Southern lady who keeps this world in order too.⁹ If women only pretended, if such an idea was believable, that alternative could suggest that women could even appropriate for themselves the ability to “pass” and could become directors of the Southern drama, leaving the men become actors only.

Of course, insisting on the stability of categories of sex/gender and race/ethnicity may well be an elaborate defense against time (and death) and time’s absolute erasure of identity boundaries, but the General’s enactment and deliberate erasure of a more effeminate self (by pretending to be who he was not) “situate[s] us on the razor’s edge that is life itself, reminding us that however the stakes in which games of identity performance are played, the final role—the final identity—knows no distinctions and no boundaries” (Lefkowitz 101). As Butler reminds us, “passing” is *indeed* a kind of failing, for another definition of passing is death, and this passing away—the ultimate failure of identity boundaries—may be the source of the anxieties about which Glasgow has been writing. Identity, it is true, is always held up through a series of arbitrary conventions. “Masculinity,” Butler argues, “is conventionally conflated with the universal and thus remains unmarked” (49). Gender, she continues, is associated with femininity, whereas masculinity is granted as an abstract, universal quality. Along these lines, Laura Berlant explains that:

Many formerly iconic citizens who used to feel undefensive and unfettered feel truly exposed and vulnerable. They feel anxious about their value to themselves, their families, their publics, and

⁹ Mrs Birdsong is essentially a frozen figure. Her marriage, Glasgow tells us, had “kept her from parties where she once shone so brilliantly, had saved her also from brooding, from that fatal introspection which is the curse of women and poets. She had had no time to fall out of love. She had not had time to discover that George was unworthy” (107). 14 Michael Uebel argues that an “attention to the specific historicity and textuality of privileged, often ideologically invisible, categories such as whiteness prevents the acceptance of their uniformity and autonomy”. Other scholars have argued that just as masculinity is stereotypically seen as a universal, nongendered abstraction, so “white” has been framed as an abstract, nonraced race. In other words, whiteness, like traditional masculinity more generally, has conventionally been granted an abstract, universal status. See for instance, Cuomo and Hall 1999; Nakayama and Martin 1998; Hill, 1997; Delgado and Stefancic 1997; Dyer 1997; Frankenberg 1997.

their nation. They sense that they now have *identities*, when it used to be just other people who had them (2). This unmarked character is, we understand, empowering for masculinity (in particular, white, middle, and upper-class, heterosexual masculinity) and disempowering for the others—the marked—alongside whom this unmarked identity is exercised. As Richard Dyer (1997) suggests, “the claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity” (2). Unmarked (universal, general) bodies can do that, whereas marked bodies cannot. Only by troubling these conventions, Butler concludes, can we begin to transcend the problematic notions of identity.¹⁰

To some extent, Archbald’s and George’s crises of masculinity do contribute to the troubling of these conventions. Because it is precisely the feminine—the other—who has developed into a spectator position, the features and bodies of the men, we could say, do become the objects of an emblematic gaze that involves, at the same time, the taking on of “feminine” traits. George’s body, for instance, takes on “feminine” traits by bearing the marks of Eva’s illness: “his handsome florid face had changed utterly since the beginning of her illness. The rounded contour, so youthful a few weeks before, had sagged and hardened, and there were lines of anxiety between nose and beneath the still boyish grey eyes” (193). Women observe the male-players performing on their stage. Etta Archbald, for instance, judges that “it is miserable for a man to be too good looking” (22). Jenny Blair instantly perceives that “it was nursing he [George] craved, the maternal sort of nursing she gave her doll after she dropped it” (58). The General himself acknowledges that George, like the other men, are judged by appearances. According to him, George is “well-favoured enough if you judged by appearances, and did women, or men either for that matter, ever judge by anything else?” (108).

The male body, we realize, is no longer “universally generalizable” (Kimmel 4), for masculinity is performative, while femininity, as we have seen, appears as a much more fixed (but also problematic) identity. Through an excess of representation itself, by constantly putting on different personae, the hero, Butler argues, can never be pinned down as a single, fixed identity and becomes able to elide identity. General Archbald’s own subversive performances seem to fit these ideas wonderfully. By remembering the past with a selective memory, by conflating past and present, the memorialized Archbald flows in and out of various characters from one instance to the next, being at the same time, “a good citizen, a successful lawyer, a faithful husband, an indulgent father [. . .] everything but himself” (128).

It is also through multiple performances, his multiple and competing identities, that Archbald’s identity is somehow “washed away,” leaving the reader with the impression that there is no real. If the women, for example, constantly refer to the presence of a smell, foreshadowing that, “industrialism

¹⁰ For Butler, “Subversive performances” such as drag shows, for example, help to demonstrate the arbitrariness of these conventions and to topple them.

will have swallowed us whole. Nothing can stop it” (249), the General, on the contrary, questions the reality of its presence; “I’ve never been positive,” the General insists, “that it isn’t mere imagination, or the emptying of garbage cans somewhere in the alley. I’ve tried my best, and I’m never able to detect it” (249). The General’s deliberate refusal to “see” (and to smell) change and his capacity to “pass” unnoticed—as a fake hunter, an inoffensive aging man, a failed patriarch, and a defeated warrior—represent fluid and conflicted identities which, in turn, could become productive moments of possibilities, which is to say, they make possible the dissolution of dominant identities as well as their rearticulating and remembrance via new and changing forms.

Celebrating the fluidity of identity may indeed encourage subversive potentials that may work against traditional, dominant notions. However, General Archbald—by assuming the role of father, husband, and grandfather—does not seem to embrace a kind of fluidity that is able to challenge conventionally fixed notions of identity; quite the contrary. Discussing Brandon Teena, the transgendered man depicted in *Boy’s Don’t Cry*, Sloop explains:

As has become commonplace in many contemporary discussions of gender and trouble, at least since the publication of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, gender and sexuality are assumed in this essay to be potentially fluid, held in check by each individual’s interpellation into a cultural ideology that maintains male-female difference [and yet,] while this move to celebrate or highlight potential disruptions of the gender binary system is indeed a vital project, it can come at the cost of focusing on ways that dominant rhetoric/discourse of gender continues to ideologically constrain. (168)

Sloop’s argument thus invites another reading. If drawing attention to the performative (and marked) features of gender may serve to destabilize gender ideals, the encouragement of a kind of fluidity itself may well contribute to reestablish dominant figures of identification. For instance, the General’s ability to “pass,” his capacity “to drift alone into old age and beyond,” can be seen as an empowering strategy of resistance within mass-cultural contexts, for as the General remarks, “[I]f cease[s] to be complex as soon as one escape[s] from the tangle of personalities” (198). Yet, this desire for nothingness can also be linked to the ideal of masculine whiteness as self-abstraction, what Dyers defined as “being nothing at all [. . .] nothing in particular, the representative human, the subject without properties” (80). Seen in this manner, the no-thing-ness of whiteness reinforces the power through self-abstraction associated with the traditional, unmarked body.

In the eyes of Jenny Blair (the living embodiment of the new South), both George and John become explorations of two (young) contradictory ideals of masculinity that could resist the dominant identities imposed by men like the General’s grandfather. One, George is “all talk,” promising theories when he is unable to sustain them. We learn for instance that “women, especially romantic women like Eva (...)

ma[d]e the mistake of measuring a man's love (George) by his theories" (102). George could be regarded as someone who does not have to make a choice, of a man who could be both things (on Washington Street and outside Washington Street), by obscuring the necessity to choose one model of manhood over another. Yet, George Birdsong's killing in his garden—metaphorically, the re-appropriation of his body into the conventional domestic sphere¹¹—and John's departure for war at the end of the story reveal that the narrative resists resolution.

John, indeed, possesses a promising character as Eva witnesses. He is also—and it is important to remember—the one who authors a false (and prettier) version of the tragedy by offering an alternative ending to George Birdsong's tragic finale: "He [George] shot himself. It was an accident" (394). He has criticized the society's evasive idealism and "after the habits of all realists in every age, disliked sentimentality" (296), yet the man of facts eventually joins forces with the Old order (Manning 345). The love for war is essentially, we could say, the search for a new public sphere, the glimpse of a new kind of public realm distinct overtly from commercial values (John is a good Socialist) and linked to an older model of virtue (the old men discuss the benefits and the greatness of past heroic acts). Neither domestic nor commercial and distinguishable from the market, the battlefield instills norms of discipline, good will, and civility. However, despite the apparent promising possibility that lies behind the departure for war, Glasgow shows that war is another escape, another obscurity, the need to play the field and conform to a larger cohesively instilled version of masculinity, instead of having to make a choice of who to be. In going to war, John will only re-enact the promises that has kept the Southern honor alive.

Seen in this light, the General's obsession with the Past (or with the pretext of the narrative) encapsulates a reflection on what he has done and missed, for his remembrance of the past is not oriented toward confirming the ways in which the future has fulfilled its promise to the past. To the contrary, he bids us remember the ways it has precisely failed to do so. For these men confronted with the failure of their monolithic concepts, Glasgow offers a new challenge: it is not enough to register the loss of traditional orders of difference, but perceiving the emergence of new ones is necessary. If the next task is not only to record old versions of masculinity but to recognize and validate new versions, the end reveals that the emergence of new identities has yet to be achieved.

In failing her men, Glasgow reminds us the lesson learnt from Walter Scott's *Waverley* in which the hero, having been separated from the withdrawing army of the Pretender, feels "entitled to say firmly, though perhaps with a sigh, that the romance of his life has ended, and that its real history had now commenced" (283). In Scott's novels, Ackerman argues: "Romance is generally regarded as an

¹¹ For Manning, "it is the frustrated, insecure, aging Southern belle who shoots George. If she cannot be sure of George's love, she cannot be sure she is beautiful, and without love and beauty she is nothing" (322).

artifact that has the power to work *in* history (not outside of history), and to reestablish social coherence. The dangers inherent in attempts to read romance as real history or transform real history according to a supposed original text are the themes of *Waverley* and its hero, Edward” (32). In other words, Edward’s mistake lies in his attempt to returning and perpetuating an original past, because he disregards the factuality, “the irreversibility of history as a process that long ago opened a gap between romance and history (33).

Glasgow’s men, we could argue, fail because they prefer to live the “romance” and try to rewrite the “history”. George lives the romance personified in Eva Birdsong, wishing that the present or the past were different. “I sometimes wish,” he says desperately, “that she didn’t believe in me. If she saw me as I am, I might be able to measure up better. But she would idealize me. She expected too much. I always knew it was hopeless” (196). George tries to go back to a wishful time where he could change things; yet he commits the mistake of not silencing the representatives of the past order. In his use of direct language to say that Eva “has never drawn a natural breath since she was married [and] if she dies [. . .] it will be the long pretense of her life that has killed her” (153) and in his socialist philosophy, John, Eva’s young doctor, is “a realist; his vision of the world is accurate, scientific, unlovely, and unhopeful. He is the only character capable of showing ‘moral indignation’ against social injustice in the South and bold enough to criticize the Industrial Revolution openly” (Santos 103). Caught up within the romance while trying to rewrite history through his political beliefs (he is a socialist), he is also—and it is important to remember—the one who authors a false (and prettier) version of the tragedy by offering an alternative ending to George Birdsong’s tragic finale (thus re-appropriating the General’s deviant version): “He [George] shot himself. It was an accident” (291). John has criticized the society’s evasive idealism and “after the habits of all realists in every age, disliked sentimentality” (296), yet the man of facts eventually joins forces with the Old Order (Manning 345) and like the ambiguous philosophical hero of Thomas Mann’s 1925 novel *The Magic Mountain*, Hans Castorp, John will head off to the terrible war of 1914-1919.

Archbald himself, like *Waverley*’s hero, realizes that, “[i]t was useless to regret. It was useless to sigh for the plumed hearse of one’s ancestors [because] people, even the best people, were more selfish, now, and fought only when their material interests were menaced,” (137) yet as Glasgow ironically remarks, letting go of old traditions is far from being achieved. When Archbald’s daughters, for instance, persuade him to put on his slippers, loosen his collar, and lie down on a sofa in his library, with the doors closed, Archbald refuses: “He shook his head stubbornly, shrinking from so serious an infringement of habit. Though it was commendable to rebel in one’s mind, it was imperative, he felt, to keep on one’s collar” (262). The allusion to the collar itself calls to mind the collar that John will himself wear later on the battle field, and the collar that George had left on the chair

of his black mistress in the lower part of the town.

For Ackerman, the emergence of new masculine identities can be achieved, but only if men follow “Waverley's conversion from "romance" to "real history" [which] signals a change of strategies,” for “the hero eventually realizes that (modern) history has completely turn loose from the script of "romance," and that "romance" has been reduced to the status of fiction. From now on, he will observe the difference between the two worlds [. . .] Instead of living the "romance" and trying to rewrite the history, he now lives the history and adapts the "romance (33).

For Glasgow's men, however, there is no change of strategy, maybe because strategies cannot be changed, or because new models of masculinity have not yet been embraced. The General's desire to cling to Eva Birdsong as the ultimate model of purity and innocence, his constant desire—even in old age—to rewrite the actual history according to the “romance” personified in Eva, reveals that “romance” and myths have become mixed up with “history.” Of course, to throw out traditions and pasts completely is hardly a solution. Instead of embracing or denying a history, perhaps the solution is to entertain multiple versions of that history, to accept the making of masculinities, as Harry Brod entitles his volume of essays on the new men's studies.

By “failing” the men, Glasgow here demands an entirely new way of defining and understanding gender and male-female interaction. Glasgow's text remains enigmatic about the role that men can or should play in the PostBellum South. Rather than clearly delineating a man's place, she leaves several possibilities open, as evidenced, for example, by the difference between John's quiet confidence, George's acquiescence, and Archbald's philosophical companionship. Yet, the possibilities are never fully satisfying and one model of manhood cannot really prevail over another. Because Glasgow's characters seem to be imperfect actualizations of ideal modes of human masculinity, their choices and theories reveal the presence of desires founded on ideals (political, religious, moral or other). They also display their delusory self-conceptions, striving toward imperfectly understood goals.

In doing so, Glasgow seems to suggest that “the utopian moment of antebellum southern literature, then, is to be found less in some of the "values" endorsed by these texts than in their (failing) insistence on the (destructive) possibility of a utopian narrativization of human history and their (faltering) endorsement—under the title of "romance"—of strategies for the interpretation of history” (Ackermann 205). Rather than simply taking the family and the past (and the gender binaries that underlie it) as a static, naturalized entity that cannot help but limit our conception of politics, Glasgow leads us to consider how, within a culture that already takes family and the past as the model for nation, the family (and the past) itself can be redefined and in the process can unsettle political “givens” that might otherwise remain equally fixed!

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