A Heroine on the Edge: Ellen Glasgow’s *Virginia*

**Mariko UTSU**

Summary:

Though Virginia Pendleton is the heroine of Ellen Glasgow’s *Virginia*, she is pushed on to a peripheral space in the structure of the society the work depicts. This paper attempts to centralize Virginia Pendleton, against the fact of her decentralized social place, and to read into her marginality. Since the novel is set at the turn of the century when American society, especially the South, went through drastic changes, social backgrounds of the novel are divided, for the convenience’s sake, into three categories: the traditional South, the Northern materialism that was speedily invading into the South after the Civil War, and the emerging feminism. The place Virginia takes in each and her relation to it is closely analyzed to reveal that her decentralization is the very issue Glasgow intended to deal with, and that she also tried to construct a hopeful image of the merging of the disconnected generations of women that had been an inevitable outcome of the early feminism.

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What should be kept in mind in reading Ellen Glasgow’s tenth novel, *Virginia* (1913), is that the novel is set at the turn of the century when America went through numerous and drastic social changes. Especially in the South, where this novel is set, changes were even more rapid and fundamental, since it also had to deal with its defeat in the Civil War. Social changes never fail to entail some alterations in human life and system of thought. Virginia, indeed, is a supreme study of social changes as such, with its protagonist, Virginia Pendleton, at the "center." As Phillip D. Atteberry comments, "focus[ing] on a character whose mind has been incapacitated by cultural conditioning, a character who, in most fictional contexts, would become yawningly tedious" (Atteberry124) must have been a dare for Glasgow, but the effect has turned out to be very interesting; Virginia is centered in the story but peripheral in the structure of society the novel depicts.

As a keen observer, Glasgow deals with three main systems existent at the turn of the century: the old, or the Pendleton idealism, new industrialism, and feminism which emerges in the latter part of the novel.¹ In the whirling wind of these three, the supposed-to-be protagonist Virginia Pendleton is left unchanged—an anchor which does not move so that it would show how other things have altered by comparison—and completely ignored.

Although Glasgow does not seem to be offering any concrete solutions as to how
"woman of tradition" like Virginia should be dealt with, except in the characterization of Susan Treadwell, her endeavor to point out the problems inherent in all the discourses existent in the book, is too valuable to be abandoned just as a view presented almost ninety years ago. Glasgow's stance which made her put such a protagonist in the center is quite contemporary an attitude, leading to the now well debated and articulated question: what is woman's tradition?

The Victorianism, the old idealism which has governed the mind of those reside in the small Southern town of Dinwiddie so far, is condensed into the person of Priscilla Batte at the beginning of the story of *Virginia*, and it prepares the reader for what s/he is encountering a bit later: the embodiment of "the feminine ideals of the ages"(4) named Virginia Pendleton. Glasgow's attitude toward the "feminine ideals," however, is insightfully skeptical.

All the dread of the unusual, all the inherited belief in the sanctity of fixed opinions, all the passionate distrust of ideas that have not stood the test of centuries—these things which make for the safety and permanence of the racial life, were in the look of motherly indulgence with which [Mrs. Peachey] regarded [Oliver](90)

Though the above quoted is a description of Mrs. Peachey's attitude toward the young Oliver's aspirations for art, it suggests that there exists a system of thought which determines the way in which Mrs. Peachey, if I may borrow Charles E. Bressler's definition of a discourse, "interpret the world in a particular fashion" (Bressler 169). When we go back to the earlier part of the novel after reading this section, the word "instinct," which Glasgow repeatedly uses in the novel, suddenly begins to have an ironical connotation.

Only in the last few years had [Priscilla's] fleshiness, due to rich food which she could not resist and to lack of exercise for which she had an instinctive aversion, begun seriously to inconvenience her. (3, emphasis added)

The "instinctive aversion" here means only "the behavior that is mediated by reactions ... below the conscious level" (Webster's) and not an act determined by biological heredity. Her aversion to physical exercises is merely her adherence to the feminine ideals which have been formed and stabilized through centuries, which she has internalized to such an extent that she followed those codes without giving a moment's thought or doubt.

Priscilla, or the majority of Dinwiddians for that matter, is following this kind of "instinct" in every aspect of their daily lives, [clinging] passionately to the habit of [their] ancestors under the impression that [they] were clinging to their ideals"(10), and "resist[ing] to the spirit of change"(11)—it is universal "human nature" to maintain a discourse peculiar to their own culture:
The same passions stirred its heart, the same instincts moved its body, the same contentment with things as they are, and the same terror of the things as they might be, warped its mind.(11)

Now, the Pendletons are the representative family of this town of Dinwiddie. With the father who hopes for "a return to the ideals of our ancestors"(27), they all cling to too old a discourse which no longer is appropriate to be taken as the base wisdom to interpret the present world. It is not only Lucy, the mother, but all of them who "could exist at all only by inventing a world of exquisite fiction around themselves"(51); they see only what their discourse, or the Pendleton idealism, permits to exist and look at them through "the transfiguring idealism with which the ages endowed [them]"(152).

If this family can be considered a miniature of the whole town, examining Lucy Pendleton’s roles in this family will be helpful to have some idea of the Dinwiddian gender roles. What is most revealing in this aspect is her words of "farewell" to the daughter on departing for her new matrimonial household:

"Remember, we have always taught you that a woman’s strength lies in her gentleness. His will must be yours now, and wherever your ideas cross, it is your duty to give up, darling. It is the woman’s part to sacrifice herself"(150).

True to these words, Lucy herself is living a life of the "perfect" mother and wife. These, however, reveal a very important thing to us readers. As she says "give up," Lucy somehow knows that there is some sacrifice woman has to pay in order to exist in the old system that she belongs to. Woman’s own "ideas" which have to be given up, then, must lead to her true self capable of conceiving her own wishes and thoughts which do not necessarily correspond to the existing more or the behavioral codes enforced by society. Lucy’s words are a testimony of woman’s "double-self," one social and the other private.

Woman’s life in the old system—Victorianism or the Pendleton idealism alike—is thus divided. The self which is defined and created by men’s desire, governs Lucy’s daily activities, and even her thoughts. She lives in the house, in her husband and in her child. For her, as well as any other woman of her likes, "love and life are interchangeable terms"(111), and this love means "not grasping, but giving"(110). The discourse regulates that this is the sole reason for her existence in the world, and she herself is convinced of it. While she goes on with her life filling out her "duties," Lucy, at the same time, checks her own behavior whether it is in accordance with the female ideals of society. If ever she should break any of these invisible laws for once, it is not necessarily the Other, men, who would punish her; she herself is both the watcher and castigator of herself. As she fulfills her duties without any flaw, waiting for and on others, her other self that the reader has a glimpse at does not show or disturb her at all.
Virginia is a faultless product of this family and also of Dinwiddie. Her education outside home happens to be such that supports what she learns at home, which is mainly instructed and conducted by Priscilla Batte whose theory is summed up as follows:

Her education was founded upon the simple theory that the less a girl knew about life, the better prepared she would be to contend with it. Knowledge of any sort . . . was kept from her as rigorously as if it contained the germ 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 . . . (17)

Glasgow emphasizes the transmission of "wisdom" among generations of women, although Virginia seems to be the last of such generations. Virginia is taught by her mother and Priscilla, more than she is by her father, or any other man. It is apparent that Glasgow sees women in this old-fashioned town as oppressed. What makes it difficult, and that is the very force of a discourse, is that woman herself takes part in her own oppression, and that being unconscious of possibility and existence of the other self inside her: the other self we have seen hidden in the life of her mother Lucy. The writer craftily shows her view through the story that a woman’s identity depends on "man, who had created her out of his own desire" (Glasgow, A Certain Measure 82).

The downfall of the South in the Civil War commenced more humiliating intrusion of the winner. The defeat was not the end of the war; accompanied by the introduction of the industrialized system of the North, the stronger’s value system made a raid on that of the weaker. Even from the beginning of the story, Glasgow makes it clear that the Victorianism of Dinwiddie is "a defeated cause"(29), which also appears in her selection of the name "Dwinddle" which connotes "dwindle." And the conqueror in this community is embodied by a single, but ominously forceful man: Cyrus Treadwell. Cyrus, who "stand[s] alone not for the decaying past, but for the growing future"(49), is both "the destroyer and the builder"(55) at the same time, in the sense that he is the milestone of the two totally different periods in the history of Dinwiddie. Along with the old rows of buildings and houses in the town, he demolishes the system of thought which prevailed there, to replace it with another set of constructions and idea, that is, industrialism.

As the name Treadwell ("tread well") suggests, Cyrus, Susan, and Oliver are the people who flexibly adjust themselves to the newer environment. The "new," however, does not necessarily mean "good" or even "better." As for Cyrus’ industrialism, it indeed is even worse than the oppressive Victorianism. Probably owing to the total loss of the Pendleton (Victorian) idealism, which was comprised by the larger Southern idealism, his treatment of his wife Belinda is downright cruel.

His attitude toward the other sex is best described as "an inherent contempt for women"(123). Lacking the sense of respect and tenderness, he makes Belinda’s life as
miserable as it could be:

... she resembled a woman who suffers from the effects of some slow yet deadly sickness. Lacking the courage to put her revolt into words, she had allowed it to turn inward and embitter the hidden sources of her being. (70)

Having married a man who had the ability to rebuild her financially disrupted family, spurred by her inner longing for the "desirable... end" (70), she suddenly finds herself miserable one day.

Virginia Woolf gives an analysis of the Victorian myth of the feminine ideals in her *A Room of One’s Own*.

... it was a protest against some infringement of his power to believe in himself. Women have served all these centuries as looking-glass possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. (Woolf, *A Room* 35)

If Mr. Pendleton got assured daily of his power by looking admiringly at his humble wife, Mr. Treadwell enjoys the same result by abusing Belinda. The "new" industrialism, at least the one embodied by this man, is no better than the Pendleton idealism. Considering that Belinda is awoken from the dream, or the fiction of "happy marriage," she is probably the more miserable.

The "double-self" of woman very subtly revealed by Mrs. Pendleton’s words to her daughter who was getting married, can be observed here, too. The difference between these two women is that Belinda, driven by her anger toward merciless Cyrus, frees herself from the wifely duties—at least in thought. However, her anger, which must have been derived from her true self rather than the one defined by convention, does not bring out the power to actually revolt.

The influence of feminism begins to appear toward the end of the story, supposedly to "rescue" the women who have been oppressed by both discourses elaborated so far. Glasgow shows the reader that this feminism is going to a wrong direction, ironically through Jenny, the second daughter of Virginia.

Susan Treadwell defies both of the two discourses in the sense that she marries a man out of comradeship and also has her own profession outside home, but she’s at the same time very compassionate, or shows "protective tenderness" (80) to women of older generations, as seen in the scene where she takes care of her mother in her sickbed. On the contrary, Virginia’s daughter Jenny, who is now away at college, is more detached, and sometimes capable of becoming rather cruel to her mother. On her return for her sister Lucy’s wedding, she happens to stub the very vulnerability of her mother while they argue over the mother’s excessive conservativeness: "[t]hey spent the rest of their lives in the storeroom or the kitchen slaving for the comfort of the men they could no longer amuse" (322). The word "they," pointed at the women willingly caged at home in general, can be replaced with "you."
Jenny’s atrocity could be justified by the then prevalent direction feminism faced. Elaine Showalter writes in her *Sister’s Choice*:

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, patterns of gender behavior and relationship were being redefined. Women’s culture was breaking down from the inside as early as the 1870s, when relationships between mothers and daughters became strained as daughters pressed for education, work, mobility, sexual autonomy, and power outside the female sphere. (Showalter 15)

It does not just "strain" the relationship between Jenny and her mother, but all what she learns in college and city teaches her never to be like her mother. Just having started to search for a new life for woman, the first thing feminism could think of might have been to reject mothers’ way of life as something trivial and meaningless.

Antagonism between the generations can be also found in Woolf’s "Professions for Women" (1942). Although judging her view based upon such a short essay as this might be unjust to her, the figurative battle of "double self" in a woman writer shows how "woman of tradition" had been treated even in as late as the 1940s.

Directly, . . . I took my pen in my hand to review that novel by a famous man, [the Angel in the House] slipped behind me and whispered: "My dear, you are a young woman. You are writing about a book that has been written by a man. Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure." . . . I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. (Woolf, "Professions" 1385)

Virginia, doubtlessly "The Angel in the House," is considered to be someone who has to be killed in order for a woman to go out for the world, or in Woolf’s case, to write an opposing review on a literary work by a male writer. Clinging to her own discourse of the Pendleton idealism, Virginia is now an enemy, or better, an obstacle of female "progress." And Jenny having absorbed such contemptuous view in herself, "her attitude toward life [becomes] masculine rather than feminine"(332).

The problem of feminism of the day is that while it empowered many women by giving them voices to articulate and by enabling them to choose to live their lives according to their own wishes, it took away even the right of existence from women like Virginia. Taking away her daughters, Lucy the older daughter who makes use of feminism for her own benefit, Jenny who actually believes in it, and finally Oliver who "treads well" with the age and choose a woman whom the age admires, feminism deprives Virginia, who lives in her children and husband, of her life, at least metaphorically.

Glasgow, however, leaves a little hope by sending back her son Harry to Virginia (though this is very unconvincing), and, more importantly, through the chara-
cterization of Susan Treadwell: "an image of physical and intellectual vitality that contrasts with Virginia" (Atteberry, 128). Despite the wide difference between Virginia and herself, Susan never tries to convince the other for any matter. Her tolerance is infinite. On the one hand, she possesses a power of will which can even overwhelm Cyrus, and on the other hand, she is a faithful daughter of Belinda who chooses to fulfill her "Duty" (193) once her mother has a fit and takes to bed.

Strangely enough, Susan’s willingness to take responsibility of the older generation and to pay respect to them, corresponds to the ideas of today’s black feminists. Alice Walker, for example—though she calls herself a "womanist"—calls for our attention to the artistry and creativity of her/our mother’s art of gardening rather than rejecting her as a domestic woman of the past in "In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens."

Walker’s essay reflects self-criticism of recent feminism that while feminists have been endeavoring to uplift the life of women they have totally overlooked the "trap" of using the same old scale to measure the value of women’s life. Though Ellen Glasgow does not seem to have achieved this revelational view, or if she did she does not articulate it at least in Virginia, her depiction of the relationship between Susan and Virginia connotes it. The generational tie between these two women is a very successful example of sisterhood.

What makes Virginia a special work is that it not only criticizes the Victorian myth of the feminine ideals, but also keenly points out the limit of the early feminism despite the fact that the writer was in the midst of it: Glasgow’s eyes were watching farther away. Even more hopeful about the story than Susan is that Glasgow has titled the last chapter "The Future," rather than "Death."

Notes
1 Francesca Sawaya argues in her "The Problem of the South" that there are two forces at struggle in the novel: the "obsolete and outgrown" "vanquished idealism" and the "new" "spirit of commercial materialism" (Sawaya’s quotations from the 1981 Virago edition of Virginia, 10). Sawaya develops her argument on the presumption that those "associated with slavery are biologically predetermined to fail" while those "associated with capitalism are biologically predetermined to succeed" (136), clarifying that it indeed is what Glasgow means by "the problem of the South." My argument heads for a different direction, but I borrowed her categorization and also added a third.

2 Pamela R. Matthews points out that Ellen Glasgow, in previous works, The Romance of a Plain Man (1909) and The Miller of Old Church (1911) namely, shifted "her focus toward gendered tradition itself, recognized that men have written women’s stories and distorted them in the process" and "concludes that women must, with the help of other women, . . . rewrite those stories and change those traditions that dictate women’s roles" (62). As a result, in Virginia, Glasgow sees women’s friendship with other women in a new light, rejecting the prescribed female self-definition and starts the search "for the way to reconstruct a self
according to some unknown female-identified standard that... had not yet been described" (69)

Works Cited
"Instinct." Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language. 1993 ed.