One of the most celebrated writers of America, Ellen Glasgow of Richmond, Virginia, is chiefly remembered as the precursor of realism in Southern fiction which had been hitherto dominated by a romanticized picture of dying traditions and lost ideals of the Victorian Era. Born in a period of transition she witnessed and recorded faithfully, the revolutionary changes that were taking place in the social and moral code of the society. A guide to the Southern Literary Renaissance, she began a solitary revolt against the false, the affected and the pretentious in Southern life.

Born on 22 April 1873, to conventional parents, Ellen Glasgow perceived the inhibiting traditions in her society against which she rebelled much to the consternation of her family. She inherited a delicate sensitivity from her mother Anne Jane Gholeson and a strong 'vein of iron', fortitude from her father, Francis Thomas Glasgow, a Scotch-Irish Presbyterian by faith. Rebelling against the prevalent sentimental romance found in such writers as Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, Mary N. Murfree, Mary Johnston and James Lane Allen, she brought to Southern fiction a realistic approach to life. She rejected the false and restrictive tradition of South's social and moral code and satirized its idealization of the past. Despite the preference for social graces and passing pleasures, she was successful in establishing the realistic trend against the "evasive idealism" that had been in vogue in Southern literature.

For her ceaseless, dedicated effort for a lifetime, stretching over a period of nearly half a century, Ellen Glasgow was recognised as an important American novelist and was duly awarded Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1942. She won the Howell's Medal for fiction in 1940. Douglas Southall Freeman pays a tribute to her in his editorial to Richmond
News Reader: “From the discouraging days when most Southern writers were sticky romanticists, with their minds on the past, she made her own way unhelped to the pre-eminent place she occupies”. She was elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1932. She was the only Southerner chosen as the sixth female member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1938. She was the first woman to receive the honorary degree from the 106 year-old University of Richmond. She received several honorary doctorates from various Universities.

Ellen Glasgow professed herself to be a born novelist, she persistently practised her art and mastered her technique. In her autobiographical writings – her letters, speeches, essays, prefaces – she is quite explicit about her scope and purpose of writing. As a realist, she wanted to portray and interpret life as she saw around her. Though Virginia formed a backdrop to her novels, she treated it as a part of larger world, never as an isolated region. While her first two novels reflect a realistic picture of Virginia, from her third novel evolved a broad design of tracing a vast panorama of Virginia life from the Civil War to the present. The many upheavals, the aftermath of the wars, through which the society had undergone, affecting the social and moral codes, are accurately portrayed in her novels. As a part of her scheme, she showed the degenerating aristocrats with their “evasive idealism” or the Victorian moral hypocrisy - much detested by Miss Glasgow - the rising middle class, lower classes – the small farmers, village craftsmen and the storekeepers – the plain people who make up a large proportion of the South’s population. Except aristocrats the other classes received little attention in literature before Ellen Glasgow began to write. She gave a sympathetic picture of the Negro characters. Among all types her women characters an important segment of Southern life, draw her central attention. While documenting the sociological change, she makes
an accurate and artistic representation of the problems of woman and her spiritual growth or deterioration. Along with the fall of many institutions such as gentility, marriage, a woman’s plight, caught in the flux of decaying morality, becomes the matrix of her novel. More than a truthful picture of the society in transition, Miss Glasgow is interested in the study of human nature. She tried to “discover the motives or qualities of endurance, that have enabled mankind to survive in any order under the sun”.

By interpreting, rather than transcribing Southern life, with a keen insight into Southern mores and its maladies, and by penetrating into the depths of the human heart, she tried to arrive at a larger understanding of life with its ultimate meaning. Her authentic record of Virginia’s life for nearly a century and her sublimating study of human nature make her work interesting and relevant to all times.

The present work aims at a close study of five of her novels with women playing pivotal roles, besides holding a mirror to a true picture of society in transition, from dying Victorian culture to modern democracy, penetrating at the same time into the many intricacies and complexities of a southern gentlewoman’s character. Ellen Glasgow considered Virginia, one of her best novels and first in her mature style. This novel is also a turning point in the novelist’s achievement, as she grew more interested in the inner lives of her protagonists which paradigmatically runs parallel to the place of woman in society. Virginia (1913) presents the dying Victorian culture and the vanishing concept of Southern lady. In Life and Gabriella (1916), the society in transition, caused by the growing industrialism and woman realising the need for self-assertion are projected. Barren Ground (1925) focuses on the trials and tribulations of an entire structure of society in transition and a woman’s intense struggle to free herself from hereditary circumstances. Vein of Iron delineates the social picture of middle class
family life during Depression with connotations of the strength of fortitude in its protagonist to achieve success amidst the ugliness of the Jazz Age. Miss Glasgow’s last novel published during her lifetime, *In This Our Life*, presents the contemporary civilization in a society which turned self-destructive. The disillusionment of the heroine reflects the chaotic condition of the society in which healthy human relationships are lost. Miss Glasgow emphasises the need for human solidarity as a way of true social life and paradigmatically presents it in the framework of familial conflicts.

The thesis is divided into three parts. The first part, **Introduction**, traces the nature of Southern fiction before the advent of Ellen Glasgow. An attempt has been made to establish her rightful place among the other reputed novelists of her time as she is the precursor of realism in Southern American Literature, painting her society under transition in its true colours, while the concurrent writing is preoccupied with a fervent celebration of romanticized pre-war South. Besides this, it also delineates the evolution of her literary career by mentioning the formative influences on her which include her wide reading, extensive travels, her milieu, some important events both happy and tragic – in her life which have left their mark on her writing. It also seeks to bring forth the thematic concerns in her novels which explicate her changing perceptions of both the external society and of the internal world of human beings and her wide variety of characters which have been hitherto neglected in letters.

Part-II, the bulk of the thesis, is divided into five chapters, each novel in a separate chapter. It is dealt with elaborately with a focus on the changing social and moral disciplines as they affect the life of a woman protagonist.

The first chapter deals with *Virginia* (1913). Virginia, the daughter of an idealistic pastor Gabriel Pendleton and the long-suffering Lucy Pendleton, is nurtured in Southern
Victorian tradition. Miss Glasgow, in her preface, tells that she wanted to portray an ironic picture of the vanishing Southern lady but she grew sympathetic as the plot progressed. She shows how Virginia, as a lady, fails to meet the demands of changing times and remains incapable of adapting herself to the needs of her husband Oliver. When Oliver badly needs her intellectual companionship, she is unable to provide it, as she is not trained that way. Miss Glasgow presents the inner strength of Virginia and focuses on the defects lying in the system in which Virginia grew. Miss Glasgow expresses her belief in the Darwinian concept that in movement or change there is life and stagnation leads to destruction. She regrets the lack of opportunity for woman either to know or express herself.

The second chapter deals with Life and Gabriella (1916). Unlike Virginia, Gabriella refuses to be bound by traditional code, though she comes from the same type of background as Virginia. Miss Glasgow shows how she defies the decaying tradition and fights with poverty. She exposes the shallowness of marriage founded on the debilitating morals of men. Through her perception of O'Hara’s true and benevolent character, Gabriella gains self-knowledge. Denouncing the falsities associated with aristocracy, Ellen Glasgow focuses on the rising middle class. Gabriella is one of the new women with a vein of iron – a fortitude – which make her life successful and meaningful.

The third chapter deals with Barren Ground (1925), the most successful and autobiographical novel of Ellen Glasgow. Dorinda, the protagonist is endowed with Glasgow’s own tormented self, her fortitude and her ironic view of humanity. The novel shows how Dorinda, betrayed by an unstable doctor belonging to an aristocratic family, conquers her own bitter feelings against her betrayer, and having achieved sobriety,
shelters and serves the same man in his last days. On the physical plane as well Dorinda triumphs over the barren ground dominated by broomsedge. Ellen Glasgow shows what a woman with a strong will can do, faced with thwarted hopes and frustrations. Accomplishing victory over the hostile forces around her, Dorinda makes her life worthy though devoid of passion. Dorinda, achieving her survival through fortitude, learns to live without love.

The fourth chapter deals with *Vein of Iron* (1935). In a society under transition with a changing social order and decaying morals, what the role of fortitude would be, is studied closely in the lives of Ada Fincastle, the protagonist her father John and her grandmother. With her inherited fortitude Ada faces the buffets of life and accomplishes a glorious victory. Miss Glasgow shows in Ralph, Ada’s husband, how persons with weak will and unstable morals succumb to the disasters of life and live miserably. She also presents the picture of how people of different types of characters respond to life in times of stress. The evolution of Ada’s moral character is one of the novel’s central merits. While interpreting the lives of Southern people, she probes into the Darwinian concept of heredity, which plays a major role in moulding one’s character.

The fifth chapter deals with the last novel published during her life, *In This Our Life* (1941). Ellen Glasgow focuses on the interior life of a community. She interprets the drama of pretense and frustration in a family, a paradigm of society, and the many conflicts that arise owing to shallow morals of the members, leading to disasters and bafflement in the protagonist, Roy. Miss Glasgow exposes the insipid liberalism and irresponsible conduct which is taken to be civilization. Roy and her father Asa Timberlake, one of Miss Glasgow’s civilized persons, are subjected to humiliation and frustration. *Miss Glasgow makes a deep study of family feeling and shows how the*
disintegration of family throws the society into chaos. She penetrates into human misery in a family struck by a tragedy and the resultant moral conflicts. Roy’s distress in the moral vacuum emphasizes the need for a total dependence on noble traits which can only stabilize the society.

Part-III concludes the thesis. It presents an overview of Ellen Glasgow’s major concerns and her chief contribution to American literature and its relevance to the present. While writing a farewell indictment of the plantation life, she also regretted the loss of its cultural values. It is quite ironical that she began her literary career as a youthful rebel against the social as well as literary conventions of her society. In her final period, she again rebelled against the literary trends which celebrated brutality or a “civilization that has discarded philosophy”. As a writer and person she remains to be quite interesting: “What a curious mixture I am! A lover of the Vedanta, of Plotinus, and of the later mystics and yet, inherently, a sceptic regarding the evidence of things seen or unseen, or believer or an unbeliever whose only creed holds that it is better to fight on the side of the Eternal ( . . . ) for the Eternal, whether we recognize its likeness or not, must be Good” (Letters). Her greater interest in the inner life of the man and her deeper understanding of the humanity that accepts the world as a whole explains Howard Mumford Jones single-lined comment: “Her concern is with the life of the soul amidst the eternal problems of existence.”

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