CHAPTER II
Ellen Anderson Gholson Glasgow is an American novelist whose realistic depictions of life in her native Virginia helped to direct Southern literature away from sentimentality and nostalgia. She portrays the changing world of the contemporary South. The chapter begins with a note on Glasgow’s life and works and her place in Southern literature, followed by a discussion of the themes of history, tradition, place, past and memory in two of her novels, *Barren Ground* (1925) and *Vein of Iron* (1935). Glasgow published her first novel, *The Descendant*, in 1897, when she was 24 years old. Glasgow’s literary career encompasses four and a half decades, comprising twenty novels, a collection of poems, one book of stories, and a book of literary criticism. Her autobiography, *A Woman Within*, was published posthumously in 1954. She has been described as the bridge, and the necessary bridge, between the world of Thomas Nelson Page and the world of William Faulkner, Katherine Anne Porter, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams.

Born into an aristocratic Virginia family, the young Glasgow rebelled against the conventional modes of feminine conduct and thought approved by her caste. Educated at home and through her own energetic readings in philosophy, social and political theory, and European and British literature, she developed a mind with enough strength and resilience to confront the truths of human experience without the sheltering illusions carefully nurtured by the dying Southern aristocratic order she saw about her.
Glasgow's strong intellect led her to a conscious channeling of her creative energies toward the making of a substantial body of fiction. At 25 Glasgow wrote "a series of sketches dealing with life in Virginia" (Charles Reagan Wilson). As she matured artistically, this early half-formed intention realized itself in a series of novels that constitutes a social history of her native Virginia. The great organizing ideas of her fiction are the conflicts between tradition and change, matter and spirit, the individual and society. The natural bent of her mind taught her that realism and irony were the best tools with which to fashion a new Southern fiction to take the place of the sentimental stories of glorified aristocratic past that dominated the regional fiction of her day. The oldest culture produced by English-speaking people in the Colonial South was that of Tidewater Virginia. It was to this South that Ellen Glasgow looked in her long career as a novelist; and out of its structure of manners undergoing steady attrition through the rise of the middle class, she made both serious fiction and comic novels. Through her poor white heroes and heroines, she introduced democratic values seldom found in the works of other Southern writers outside Mark Twain. From the very beginning of her intellectual and creative life, she rejected Victorian definitions of femininity dominating the social attitudes of her day.

In the world about her Glasgow thought that "What distinguished the Southerner, and particularly the Virginian, from his severer neighbors to the North was his ineradicable belief that pleasure is worth more than toil, that it is worth more even than profit. Although the difference between the Virginian and the far Southerner was greater than the distance between Virginia and Massachusetts, a congenial hedonism had established in the gregarious South a confederacy of the
spirit" (1943:135). The Tidewater South became for Glasgow “a living tradition decayed, with the passage of years, into a sentimental infirmity” (1943:142).

In the long series of novels which she published between 1897 and 1941 Glasgow attempted to produce a body of work which spanned the social history of Virginia from the Civil War. She said, “I began a history of manners that would embrace those aspects of Southern life with which I was acquainted . . . I planned to portray the different social orders, and especially, for this would constitute the major theme of my chronicle, the rise of the middle class as the dominant force in Southern democracy” (1943:4). She arranged into three groups the thirteen novels she valued most highly of the nineteen books of fiction which she produced. She felt that she had written her best books after 1922. Among these books was Barren Ground (1925), a Hardy-esque narrative of Dorinda Oakley who personified in the country “the spirit that fought with gallantry and gaiety, and that in defeat remained undefeated”(1943:5). Vein of Iron (1935) was a grim novel of the country. Her subject matter, as she herself defined it, was the “retreat of an agrarian culture before the conquests of an industrial revolution, and the slow and steady rise of the lower middle class” (1943:75).

Glasgow was both the self-conscious spokesman for the Seaboard Southern culture and at the same time she was one of its sharpest critics. For her the tradition of manners and the pattern of conduct which the Tidewater South had produced served the function of making those tests of character and of custom upon which she wished to expend her energies. She was a part of the region of which she wrote and lived most of her life in Richmond. She was caught up
herself in a pattern of behavior common to the patrician citizen of the post-Civil War World; and yet it was a world whose traditions seemed to her to have survived as empty forms long after the demise of the moral convictions and the ethical systems which originally had called them forth. That her society was one in which tradition had solidified into meaningless postures made it, she felt, a proper subject for comedies and tragic-comedies of manners, for she saw everywhere about her what she called “a tone of manners (which) rang hollow (because) the foundations of the old aristocratic order...had never safely settled back on their corner-stone of tradition” (1943: 237-38).

*The Deliverance* (1904), the best of her early novels, offers a naturalistic treatment of the class conflicts emerging after the Civil War. Its evocation of the Virginia landscape and tobacco farming invites comparison with Hardy’s epics of the soil. In her women’s trilogy – *Virginia* (1913), *Life and Gabriella* (1916), and *Barren Ground* (1925), Glasgow assigns each of her Virginia heroines a fate determined by her response to the patriarchal code of feminine behavior that had formed her, a code that, as Glasgow shows so well in *Barren Ground*, always pitted women against their own biological natures. After *Barren Ground*, which marked her arrival at artistic maturity, Glasgow produced three sparkling comedies of manners – *The Romantic Comedians* (1926), *They Stooped to Folly* (1929), and *The Sheltered Life* (1932), the last of the author’s finest work. In these novels of urban Virginian life depicting the clash of generations, she again shows her women characters reacting to patriarchal stereotypes limiting their individuality and growth, while at the same time exposing either with comic or with satiric irony the limitations these views of women place on the male characters who hold them.
The Voice of the People (1900), although third in the history series, was the first to be published, because, unlike The Battle-Ground (1902) and The Deliverance (1904), it required no research. This novel deals with Ellen Glasgow’s own childhood, and we meet her for the first time as a writer in full possession of her native materials. In her early fifties Ellen Glasgow suffered from the tendency, commonly seen in many older people, to find youth without standards and to deplore the loss of discipline in the world about her. Her correspondence of the time was increasingly full of complaints about the sloppiness and sordidness of modern living and modern literature. She came to look back on her own past, which she had found as a girl, with increased nostalgia as she saw the effects of the new liberty of deportment and the new realism of expression that she had herself espoused.

Glasgow was on the best-seller lists five times and this is a testimony to her popularity. Her artistic recognition had reached its height in 1931 when, as the acknowledged doyenne of Southern letters, she presided over the Southern Writers’ Conference at the University of Virginia. In 1942 she received the Pulitzer Prize for her novel, In This Our Life (1941).

The fiction of Glasgow provides an explanation of the changes that the literary tradition of the 19th century had undergone and also about the nature of the transformation. In fact, the course taken by the Southern literature in the 19th century is epitomized in her work. Her early novels throw into relief the nineteenth-century tradition; her later fiction, beginning with Barren Ground
(1925), highlights the means by which she and other major Southern writers have understood the plight of Western man in the 19th century.

In the 1890s when Glasgow was beginning to search contemporary Southern literature for a mentor, the dominant figure was her fellow Virginian, Thomas Nelson Page. For the girl whose quiet exterior hid a smoldering fire of revolt, the limp sentimentalism of his characters and his romantic distortion of the South into a golden age were not to be tolerated. Glasgow was not satisfied with his presentation as she was seeking for someone who was digging beneath the surface for basic realities. Forced to find her own way, Glasgow wrote her first two novels more in defiance of her Southern heritage than for any new or different program. In The Descendant (1897) and Phases of an Inferior Planet (1898) she deliberately flaunted contemporary proprieties. With these two novels out of her system she made her peace with tradition, though it was a peace on her terms. She had been writing about people living in New York City, an area about which she knew little, and she soon discovered, as almost all Southern writers have, that literature “must spring from roots” which reach down into a place and back into a past. As Minique Parent Frazee says, “Her roots lay of course, in Virginia, and there she returned. But she was to write of her state as no Virginian before her had written. She was to record in her fiction the downfall of the old social order and the rise of the new. This was to be no dirge but an enthusiastic welcome.” (1976: 171).

In later years she called her plan as Allen W. Becker says, “a social history of Virginia under the guise of fiction” (1959:300). Through their authenticity and in the attitude they embody, Glasgow continued her revolt and, thereby, brought to
Southern letters the first conscious literary realism. However, much before this, Mark Twain set an unprecedented landmark for American Literature by intertwining fantasy, satire and realism in his critique of American identity. *Huckleberry Finn* is one of the most prominent representations of Twain's realism. As a doctrine her realism rejected the convention of idealizing the past and romanticizing the present; it demanded freedom in subject matter. More specifically it proposed to present material only after it had been verified by personal experience or scholarly research, and it sought to rectify the omission of the poor white, the yeoman, and the businessman from Southern fiction.

Thus for *The Battle-Ground* (1902) she read the files of three newspapers for the Civil War years and walked the ground on which the action of the novel took place. Before writing *The Deliverance* (1904), she spent several months on a tobacco farm in order to review her knowledge of the whole process from seed to cured leaf. Whenever she could, she used actual people as models for her characters. So important to her was the authenticity of setting and character that she apologized when she had to rely on her imagination for the heroine of *The Romance of a Plain Man* (1909). She was not, of course, the first Southerner to write from experience; a generation before, John Esten Cooke had, for example, based his war trilogy on personal knowledge of the conflict, but by systematic practice of such fidelity and by making it a part of her literary theory, Glasgow modified the Southern tradition.

Among her many innovations, the most radical lies in her rejection of the aristocratic basis of society and her welcome of the new order which was coming
into being. In the early novels this new outlook is exemplified in her treatment of
the male aristocrat. Dan Montjoy of *The Battle-Ground* and Christopher Blake of
*The Deliverance* have some backbone, but they are possessed by the irrational and
destructive courage which Glasgow presented as a dominant aristocratic trait.

In her early novels Glasgow, consciously or unconsciously, was reinforcing
some elements of the tradition and changing others. The signs of a shift in attitude
are evident in *One Man in His Time*, and a new viewpoint becomes explicit in *They
Stooped to Folly* (1929) and *The Sheltered Life* (1932). Industrialism was
producing a more thorough change than she had anticipated; the result was a sterile
materialism. Thus, in her later novels, Glasgow took her stand on the same ground
on which the agrarians and others were taking theirs. As she shifted her old view of
industrialism, she aligned herself with one of the central ideas of current Southern
literature.

Although the fiction of the Southern Renaissance is usually marked by an
anti-industrial bias, its most notable feature is its regionalism. As Allen Tate
defines the term (and illustrates the concept in *The Fathers*), it involves a depth not
only in space but also in time. Thus to know a person (or oneself), one must know
the land, the family, the lineage. In Caroline Gordon’s *The Garden of Adonis, None
Shall Look Back*, and *The Women on the Porch*, the relationship of the characters
to their past becomes one of the criteria by which we evaluate their success or
failure.

The sense of the past in these and other novels is almost invariable in
Southern fiction. Kennedy, Simms, Cooke, Caruthers — all wrote of earlier times
in the South; but their viewpoint differs from the new one in that regionalism contains an awareness of the “presentness” of the past. It is this new regional quality in Glasgow’s later work that puts her in the main stream of the Southern tradition. In explaining why she “returned” to Virginia, she wrote that “Family ties had linked me so closely to the past that I had always felt myself to be attached to its permanent structure. In my blood there were remote inheritances from the past three hundred years in Virginia; and when I recorded events that occurred before I was born, I seemed to be writing of things that I had already known” (1943: 67).

As mentioned in Chapter I there is a knotty relationship between past, regional identity, history and tradition. Glasgow reasserted the traditional values of history and myth as her bulwarks against the chaos of modern world. In her later novels, notably Barren Ground, The Sheltered Life and Vein of Iron, the protagonists rely increasingly upon memories of an older rural or communal order to lead their lives with dignity and purpose. This celebration of Southern values and tradition, though tempered by Glasgow’s irony, linked her writing to a regional literary heritage. In her novels regionalism manifests itself in various ways. In Barren Ground, Dorinda Oakley is so rooted in the land that it becomes the groundwork of her consciousness. So intimate is the relationship that when she gives her toil and frustration to the land, it repays her with fortitude and endurance. This novel is somewhat underprovided in the time dimension that is expected in a regional work, but both qualities are evident in the next novel Vein of Iron (1935). It is concerned with a problem common in recent Southern fiction – the transmission of the values achieved in the past to the twentieth century industrial and commercial world. Here it is the toughness of spirit, the vein of iron that is
carried from the pioneer past through Grandmother Fincastle to Ada. The family is also linked to the past through the house in Ironside, whose magnetic pull is effectively presented at the end of the novel in John Fincastle’s animal-like journey home to die. An equally successful rendering of the “presentness” of past time is the interlude in *The Sheltered Life*, “The Deep Past.”

The next two sections deal with the use of Southern themes such as history, place, time, tradition and family including past and memory in the two novels, *Barren Ground* and *Vein of Iron* which can be categorized as Novels of Country. These two novels have some similarity in that the lives of the central characters Dorinda Oakley and Ada Fincastle, reflect Glasgow’s own life.

**BARREN GROUND**

Ellen Glasgow proved to be a regionalist in her novel *Barren Ground* (1925). The germ of the book had lain in her mind for many years; but when at last it had developed too vigorously to be ignored, she felt that she had broken away, even more sharply than in her earlier work, from well-established convention.

Shortly after the United States entered the First World War, Glasgow heard a famous man, at a New York dinner party, declare: “America needs this war!” “America might need it,” she retorted, “but the South doesn’t; it has had its war


All subsequent references to the novel are to this edition.

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already." She could only hope that this new suffering might bring people face to face with reality. "When you confront anything so tremendous," she explained, "it carries you back to your soul...[to] a consciousness of God" (1996:241). Glasgow wanted to believe that the anguish of the Civil War and Reconstruction had given the South a deeper spiritual awareness, a kind of socially informed collective memory. Susan Goodman in her article says "Yet, forever a skeptic, she could not help wondering whether historical memory, no less than personal memory, had any meaning" (1996:241).

*Barren Ground* may be regarded logically as one of the scenes from country life in a social history of Virginia since the Civil War. Or it may be considered, with equal logic, to stand alone, as it is in Glasgow's estimation, secure in its own weight and substance. It was outlined, indeed, as the first of her novels of the country, after she had completed, and dismissed from her thoughts, the final volume of her history of manners.

This novel stands squarely in the doorway through which the tradition of Southern writing passes from the often barren past into its fruitful modern period. As outlined in Chapter I, Ellen Glasgow is one of the voices who differs from the sentimental view of 19th century tradition and who made a break from it. Along with the special interest Allen Tate, Stark Young, and Robert Penn Warren took in Glasgow's writing, the novel's position in time implies that the book must have cast a significant shadow across the Southern imagination of the decade that followed. In this work the landscape frequently turns out to be a manifestation of the psyche; it serves as a screen upon which the protagonist projects the otherwise
ineffable contents of her mind. Julius Rowan Raper feels that “Glasgow’s remarkable use of the land ought to hold special interest for critics” (1980: 79).

With *Barren Ground* Glasgow returned to the rural setting of her earlier Virginia novels. Yet in its blend of satire against the petty restrictions of Virginia society and of praise for the enduring values of land, blood, and tradition, this work marked a dramatic break with Glasgow’s previous fifteen novels. Beginning with *Barren Ground*, which Marcelle Thiebaux calls an “epic of the soil” (1982:124), Glasgow deliberately depicted her characters struggling to recover, a regional identity in this novel.

As mentioned in Chapter I the voice of the narrator in literature gives flesh and blood to history. The narrator of the novel *Barren Ground* through the character of Dorinda told how the South was reconstructed after the Civil War. *Barren Ground* tells the story of a daughter (Dorinda Oakley) of Protestants (Presbyterians), whose teachings dominated the American South. According to Julius Rowan Raper she is “a young woman who has been wounded in her sex. Her story passes through three phases: first, the siege and capture of her citadel; then her recovery and her long project of revenge; and finally the effort to accommodate her damaged emotions to the order of nature”(1980:80). According to Minique Parent Frazee, “Glasgow disguises this tale of revenge — from the casual reader and usually from the heroine herself — as a female success story, an exemplum of survival, struggle, and triumph over circumstances” (1976: 172).

Land and the promise it brings is one of the Southern themes as outlined in Chapter I. In the novel the entire story is woven around Dorinda, her struggle with
the land and her final triumph. Dorinda lives on a farm with her ineffectual father, "he was a good man and a tireless labourer; but that destiny which dogs the footsteps of ineffectual spirits pursued him from the hour of his birth" (BG, 9), her obsessively self-sacrificial mother, and her worthless brothers. Her salvation, she believes, is through romance with Jason Greylock, a young doctor for whom she has conceived a secret passion. He, however, abandons her. She is pregnant and moves to New York City for the duration of her pregnancy. The city serves as a patriarchal nether world for a fallen woman. While there Dorinda is hit by a Taxi-cab, loses the fetus, but gets a job and begins saving money. Having learned in the process of her fall how to negotiate the world of capitalist patriarchy, Dorinda returns home determined to become a small-business entrepreneur and make a success of their farm. Dorinda felt that she was meeting life, at this moment, on its own terms, stripped of illusion, stripped of even of idealism, except the idealism she could wring from the solid facts of experience. The blow that had shattered her dreams had let in the cloudless flood of reality. "You can't change that past by thinking." She told herself stubbornly, "but there must be something ahead. There must be something in life besides love" (BG, 192).

The novel Barren Ground opens with a discussion of Pedlar's Mill's traditions, focusing on an original matrilineal heritage in her hometown that Dorinda will have to regain. The initial image of the novel, striking in its visual concreteness, emphasizes Dorinda's isolation and also objectifies her. Such an introduction announces the desolation not only of the town and the landscape against which she poses, but also the difficulty of female self-definition against a cultural backdrop that provides few models. Her "Orange-colored shawl" stands
out against the white snow; her motionlessness gives her "an impression of arrested flight." The "bare, starved, desolate" landscape "close(s) in about her," and the last train has gone (BG, 3).

The larger significance of the first chapter is the narrator’s condemnation of cultural imposition, as practiced by the settlers of Pedlar’s Mill in order to preserve those cultural imperatives and convince others that their status is natural. This heritage of intolerance, disguised as religious righteousness and a fatalistic belief in the natural landscape’s inevitable triumph over the “human invader” (BG, 4), is revealed through the narrator’s patently ironic introductory history of area and its settlers. Heightened class consciousness led the settlers of Queen Elizabeth Country to distinguish “good people” from “good families,” the latter designation reserved for the “superior pioneers” with “blue blood in their veins” and “the fear of God in their hearts” (BG, 5). Among the early settlers is Dorinda’s great grandfather, John Calvin Abernethy, who bought a “thousand acres of land and fifty slaves” (BG, 7). Glasgow’s irony (evident, for example, in naming the ancestor for Calvin) condemns the staunch Presbyterian forebear whose belief in predestination enabled his easy transition to the determinism that designated his superiority as natural. Abernethy sold his slaves farther South, the narrator recounts, “and the price of black flesh he devoted to the redemption of black souls in the Congo” (BG, 8). The narrator says, “To a thrifty theologian, bent on redemption with economy, there are few points of ethics too fine-spun for splitting” (BG, 8). The doubly oppressive tenets of slaveholding and missionary zeal, which enables a view of others as needing “redemption,” form part of the heritage of Pedlar’s Mill. Though a distinction is made between aristocratic “good
families” and middle-class “good people,” both are ironized. The “good families” have preserved, among other things “custom, history, tradition, romantic fiction, and the Episcopal Church,” whereas the “good people have preserved nothing except themselves” (BG, 5). There’s not really much difference, Glasgow suggests: both traditions emphasize the self-righteousness of those doing the preserving.

The cultural imperatives worthy of preservation, according to the time and place, certainly do not include encouraging the development of women. The daughters like Dorinda are responsible only to some extent for changing the patriarchal traditions of the place and the age. Dorinda’s mother, Eudora, inherited her own father’s land, though through marriage it effectively became her husband’s. Glasgow seizes the chance to make her point that, within a patriarchal structure, Mrs. Oakley’s ownership can only be allowed with male approval: “The farm had always belonged to Mrs. Oakley; but in order that her authority might be assured, Joshua had made a will a few months before his death and had left her the farm implements and the horses” (BG, 255).

It is partly through Dorinda’s relationship with Fluvanna Moody, the black woman who works with her to establish the dairy farm, that Dorinda is able to overcome the heritage of intolerance and determinism in Pedlar’s Mill. Fluvanna’s race, her gender, and her close relationship with another woman make her centrality in Dorinda’s life a challenge to Pedlar’s Mill’s racism, misogyny, and heterosexism; Fluvanna’s aid in Dorinda’s agricultural scheme to overcome the fateful broomsedge makes her a partner in standing up to the town’s deterministic
view that broomsedge, a metonymic substitute for the whole cultural landscape, is “a kind of fate.” When Dorinda is able to create for herself a contented female life by simultaneously substituting female companionship for heterosexuality, racial diversity for segregation, and innovative agricultural methods for the outdated farming practices common in Pedlar’s Mill, she threatens the hegemonic traditions that try to define her. She asserts herself against cultural tradition, and in so doing also asserts her creator’s challenge to traditional narrative.

In the novel morality springs from the soil, or, rather, from man’s battle with it. All the characters in it are mostly connected with the land. Glasgow once explained that “the places I loved or hated between the ages of three and thirteen compose an inexhaustible landscape of memory” (1943:148). The broomsedge is the eternal enemy, always ready to engulf every new farm and field, and men are graded by how they fight it. Jason Greylock, Dorinda’s lover in her youth, is weak, and he is broken and finally in dying becomes a lesser thing than the soil; he is identified with a thistle. “She had longed to punish him for his treachery; she had hated him for years until she had discovered that hatred is energy wasted; but in all her past dreams of retribution she had never once thought of the poorhouse. Even as a question of justice, it seemed to her that the poorhouse was excessive” (BG, 468). And she realized “with a piercing flash of insight, saw him as he was, false, vain, contemptible, a coward in bone and marrow. He wronged her; he had betrayed her; he had trampled her pride in the dust; and he had done these things not from brutality, but from weakness” (BG, 165). Dorinda in her fortitude, a Glasgow fortitude built on Jason’s desertion, triumphs over the land and builds a dairy farm where the broomsedge was. After the death of her husband, Nathan
Pedlar, whom she married for convenience, and of Jason, Dorinda embraces the land anew.

Twenty-five years before the publication of the novel *Barren Ground*, Glasgow was thrilled by a sense of vocation; she had resolved to write of the South not sentimentally, as a conquered province, but truthfully, as part of a larger world. So she had resolved to portray not Southern “types” alone, but whole human beings, and to touch, or at least feel for, the universal chords beneath regional variations of character. She was of the firm conviction “that there are many facets of human nature and what is called as regional is simply the universal surveyed from a shifted angle of vision” (1943: 153).

The significance of the novel, the quickening spirit, would not have varied, as Glasgow believes, had she been born anywhere else. Nevertheless, the scene in *Barren Ground* possessed an added dimension, a universal rhythm more fluent than any material texture. Under the lights and shadows there is the brooding spirit of place, but, deeper still, under the spirit of place, there is the whole movement of life. Dorinda had many bitter experiences in her life but the power of life made her to face them with courage. “By some accident, for which nothing in her past experience had prepared her, all the laws of her being, thought, will, memory, habit, were suspended. In their place a force which was stronger than all these things together, a force with which she had never reckoned before, dominated her being. The powers of life had seized her as eagle seizes its prey” (BG, 29).

For the setting of the novel, *Barren Ground*, Glasgow went far back into the past, to the days of her childhood. For the novel, Glasgow returned to Louisa
country in Virginia, where she had spent childhood summers in the happiest manner. The country is as familiar to her as if the landscape unrolled both without and within. Her portrayal of the country conforms to what Dorothy M. Scura said, "The greatest fiction tells the truth, and it elicits feeling. Truth and feeling are inextricably linked to place" (1986:46). All the images of the south — the houses, the roads, the woods, the endless fields of broomsedge and scrub pine, the low, immeasurable horizon — were seen by her through the remembering eyes of a child. And even with the passage of time, her memory had preserved these impressions unaltered. "Every young green leaf, every dew-drenched weed, every silken cobweb, every brilliant bird, or gauze-winged insect;—all these things were illuminated and bedizened with color. Only the immense black shadow of the horse and buggy raced somberly over the broomsedge by the roadside" (BG, 257).

They are the lighter semblances folded over the heart of the book. But Dorinda, though she had been close to Glasgow for ten years before she began her story, is universal. She exists wherever a human being has learned to live without joy, wherever the spirit of fortitude has triumphed over the sense of futility. In the words of Glasgow, "the novel’s minor themes, episodes, and impressions are blended with the one dominant meaning that character is fate. They are blended by life, not imposed by the novel" (1943: 154). At the end, the implicit philosophy may be summed up in a phrase: one may learn to live; one may even learn to live gallantly, without delight. So Dorinda was free to grow, to change, and to work out her own destiny.
Endurance. Fortitude. The spirit of the land was flowing into her, and her own spirit, strengthened and refreshed, was flowing out again toward life. This was the permanent self, she knew. This was what remained to her after the years had taken their bloom. She would find happiness again. Not the happiness for which she had once longed, but the serenity of mind which is above the conflict of frustrated desires (BG, 509).

In *Barren Ground*, as in *The Sheltered Life*, Glasgow dealt with a community in which the vital stream was running out into shallows. Though they belonged to different classes of society, one rural and the other urban, these two dissimilar social groups were both remnants of an older civilization, of a dying culture.

In any discussion of *Barren Ground*, it is inevitable to see that mention is made of how time and space emerge as the dominant powers. The sense of time is more difficult to achieve, and since it cannot be forced, it remains the most important problem that confronts the writer of fiction. *Barren Ground* records the significant events in a single drama of experience, where success or failure depend largely upon a natural impression of the passing days, weeks, months and years.

When she (Dorinda) came to herself, it was an hour, a day, or a year afterward. She was still on the bare ground, beneath the blackened pine, in front of Aunt Mehitable's cabin. The tortoise-shell cat still dozed on the step. The dying embers still blinked under the hanging pot. There was a pungent smell in her nostrils, as the old woman splashed camphor over her forehead. Her consciousness was struggling through the fumes which saturated her brain (BG, 137).

This is made less easy when in so many of the years nothing has happened, when the drama is one of perpetual recurrence, of endless monotony. But, whatever the outcome, this movement of time cannot be arranged; it must flow inevitably from the theme of the story, which continues to obey the laws of an imaginary universe. Leaves budding, leaves falling, sun or snow, rain or dust, youth or age, life or
death — this eternal sequence must place the tone of the narrative, in the words of Glasgow “they sustain the gradually lengthening effect of duration” (1943:159). Not the landscape alone, but the living human figures must reflect the slow rhythm and pause of the seasons, the beginning, the middle, and the end of man’s warfare with nature.

Fate had linked Dorinda with the almshouse. She brings with her, not only her own name, but the inevitable title of the book in a single phrase, the vital clue to her past. Dorinda thought drearily about her life and said “just barren ground where they have to struggle to make anything grow” (BG, 190). At the beginning of Jason’s final illness, the contrast between her standing by the almshouse wall and the ecstasy of the meetings on the summer nights thirty years before is full of pain for her: “Those summer evenings thirty years ago, and this autumn day beside the wall of the poor house!” (BG, 486). This sentence flickered up again in Glasgow’s memory and ran, like a soundless murmur, under her story. As the novel unfolded, it was a complete reversal of a classic situation. For once, in Southern fiction, the woman betrayed by men / a man would become the victor instead of the victim. In the end, she would triumph through that deep instinct for survival, which had ceased to be a negative quality and had strengthened into a dynamic force. She would harden by adversity, but hard things, as she said, are the last to decay.

The vein of iron which had supported her through adversity was merely the instinct older than herself, stronger than circumstances, deeper than the shifting surface of emotion; the instinct that had said, “I will not be broke.” Though the words of the covenant had altered, the ancient mettle still infused its spirit (BG, 460).
And she would never lose her inner fidelity, that vital affirmation of life, “I think, I feel, I am.” The only thing that mattered was her triumph over circumstances. Dorinda's rise from the daughter of a “land poor” farmer to an independent agribusiness woman managing two reclaimed farms suggests that Barren Ground champions an urban insistence on the application of industrial techniques to agriculture. Even the reclamation of the farm, which a few critics have over-emphasized, was merely an episode. Systems of agriculture were unimportant beside this human drama of love and hatred, of passion and disillusionment. As Dorinda conquered the land, which was, for her, the symbol of fate, so Jason, her lover surrendered through his inherited weakness. “The slow seasons, the blighted crops, the long droughts, the sudden frosts — all this impotence of nature had afflicted his mind and body, as if it were the symptom of a mortal infirmity. His breed, unlike Dorinda’s, held no immunity from the fatal germ of resignation” (quoted in Ellen Glasgow’s A Certain Measure 1943: 161).

In Glasgow's imagination, Dorinda had not only survived, she had lived some separate daily life of her own; she had become the center of a universe that expanded. Tracing Dorinda's growth, Glasgow says that “from a still figure beside a whitewashed wall, she had stepped out into the sunlight; she had put on identity” (1943: 162). Every novelist is familiar with the potential energy that resides in imaginary persons, and with the way these persons rebel and follow their own courses when they are banished for long periods to the unlit places of memory. So finally Glasgow discovered, that Dorinda was not the woman she had believed her to be when she saw her first through her imagination. Though her name had not altered, she herself had grown more substantial and more human. In the words of
The memories of Dorinda had washed over her as the tide washes over a beach, and she found that they had changed and developed together” (quoted in Ellen Glasgow’s *A Certain Measure* 1943: 162).

The novel has invited interpretation within new discursive frameworks which give insights into an understanding of the novel’s themes. The Demeter-Persephone myth is singularly relevant to the historical transition that occurred in middle class women’s culture in the late nineteenth century in the Western World. It allegorizes the transformation from a matricentric preindustrial culture — Demeter’s realm — to a male-dominated capitalist-industrialist ethos, characterized by growing professionalism and bureaucracy: the realm of patriarchal captivity. This transition is the central text of the major women realists of the early twentieth century: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather and Ellen Glasgow. As Josephine Donovan says, “the novel is a classic repetition of the Persephone-Demeter cycle and as such may represent the psychic transformation the author herself was undergoing at the time” (1989:148). The novel opens in the 1890s in winter, the nadir of the vegetative cycle. The first view of twenty-year-old Dorinda Oakley is stark and desolate. The land is infertile: “it took everything and gave back nothing” (BG, 39). “Broomsedge” which stands for scruffy shallow-rooted brush is the title of the first section while succeeding sections are entitled “Pine” and “Life-Everlasting,” signifying vegetation with deeper roots that is more permanent. Consequent upon Jason’s betrayal, she goes through the terrible trauma of being considered a fallen woman and later moves to the city trying to fend for herself. In her dark night after she loses her baby a transformation occurs...
within her, a psychic resurrection that is described metaphorically in terms of newborn vegetation.

For the first time since she had left home, she felt that earlier and deeper associations were reaching out to her, that they were groping after her, like tendrils of vines, through the darkness and violence of her later memories. Earlier and deeper associations, rooted there in the earth, were drawing her back across time and space and forgetfulness. Passion stirred again in her heart, but it was passion transfigured, recoiling from the personal to the impersonal object. It seemed to her, walking there in the blue twilight, that the music had released some imprisoned force in the depths of her being, and that this force was spreading out over the world, that it was growing wider and thinner until it covered all the desolate country at Old Farm. With a shock of joy, she realized that she was no longer benumbed, that she had come to life again (BG, 239).

Rejuvenated, Dorinda tackles the wilderness of her land. And while the area still looks desolate and barren upon her return, Dorinda has developed the psychic tools of the new woman necessary for success: she is "the picture of...self-reliance" (BG, 160); she is "armored in reason" (BG, 282). As in O Pioneers! the death of the father signifies Dorinda’s rise to power. Dorinda’s enterprise and works nevertheless intrigue her mother, characteristically weak and victimized, at her side. But like the early (and unlike the later) Antonia, Dorinda’s identity remains somewhat masculine: she wears her brother’s overalls and has a willful, conquering spirit. Nevertheless, “kinship with the land was filtered through her blood into her brain. Dimly, she felt that only through this fresh emotion could she attain permanent liberation of the spirit” (BG, 306).

A spaciousness unique in Glasgow’s fiction derives from her symbolic use of the land: the wastes of broomsedge at Pedlar’s Mill – in the Piedmont region of Virginia – dominate characters and action in the novel, much in the way that bleak Egdon Heath pervades Hardy’s The Return of the Native. In both novels, too, the
degree to which the principal characters can adjust to primitive existence close to
nature determines their fortunes. The relationships fully probed in *Barren Ground*
between characters and their native region demonstrate that Glasgow was
responsive to Southern agrarian sentiment and that she also anticipated the
preoccupation of later twentieth-century Southern writers with the inescapable
influence of soil upon soul.

The flowing and ebbing rhythms also characterize the pattern of the year so
that in retrospect the same season from different years seems but one season to
Dorinda. As she looks forward at the end of the novel to experiencing repeatedly
this cycle of the year, she finds herself immersed again in the ceaseless energies of
nature: “the spirit of the land was flowing into her and her own spirit, strengthened
and refreshed, was flowing out again toward life” (BG, 449). From the time of her
mother’s mental disturbance as a young woman, Dorinda had felt that the land
exerts a terrifying power, working for good and evil. She realizes that she and her
parents derive inevitably from the same spare soil, as do “the scant crops and the
exuberant broomsedge,” that the land has entwined itself into the basic fibers of
their beings.

This excellent novel has as its central insight the paradox that Dorinda is
both a winner and casualty in her struggle with the soil. The land exerts a powerful
spell upon her, which she must listen to in the end. She therefore returns from New
York City to a country-side far less inviting in the actuality than it had seemed in
her imagination when she was away from it. Yet the grimness of her existence on
the land is offset by her sense of a kinship with its strength “filtering through her

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blood into her brain," a feeling compounded of "pity, memory, and passion."
Though Dorinda squanders her youth in restoring the "dead land to life," she has her reward, after her night of spiritual travail at the end of the novel, in her knowledge that "the land would stay by her" until the end.

'Put your heart in the land,' old Matthew had said to her. 'The land is the only thing that will stay by you.' Yes, the land would stay by her. Her eyes wandered from far horizon to horizon. Again she felt the quickening of that sympathy which was deeper than all other motions of her heart, which love had overcome only for an hour and life had been powerless to conquer in the end;—the living communion with the earth under feet. While the soil endured, while the seasons bloomed and dropped, while the ancient, beneficent ritual of sowing and reaping moved in the fields, she knew that she could never despair of contentment (BG, 510).

When she is reclaiming the Greylock farm and fires the scrub pine and sassafras and broomsedge, she has the sense that all her past illusions of romance are being consumed; in the words of Frederick McDowell, "such is the exaction imposed by nature for control of the land. Only ascetics like Dorinda or the Alexandra Bergson of Miss Cather, who no longer dissipate their energies in gratifying the impulses of the flesh, can summon the force to bring the land to heel" (1963: 151). Mastery of the impersonal powers of nature is assured only when mastery of the self is complete. Dorinda occasionally feels that she may have paid too high a price for her success, but such misgivings are, for the most part, momentary.

If Dorinda gains a final optimism as a result of her sheer ability to endure, it is, as Glasgow pointed out, only "a cheerful cynicism," and a philosophy which does not have much basis in "any convincing lesson experience." The strongest sections of the novel are those which express Dorinda’s sense of futility, despite
her intermittent sense of renewal from contact with the land: ultimately she looks forward to "the ample leisure of the time when she should expect nothing" (BG, 401). "The gnawing worm at the heart of experience" (quoted in Frederick P.W. McDowell 1963: 155), is her sense of disenchantment that nothing lasts; the love and hatred too, pass before they can be completely known. Her later success with the farm brings depression rather than elation because she continually contrasts her present prosperity with the deprivation of her parents in the past.

Despite her efforts, Dorinda was confronted with painful moments, such as her father's funeral. She is disappointed in her inability to feel deeply and to express tenderness, affection and grief when they strike her. After a long struggle Dorinda was able to get her land. As the novel closes, Dorinda's last words repeat her litany, "I am thankful to have finished with all that" (BG, 511). Glasgow suggests that like the vigilance that Dorinda must exercise to hold off the broomsedge, her struggle with her powerful passions must continue throughout her life.

The novel invites readings such as an urban insistence on the application of industrial techniques to agriculture. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Glasgow depicts changes that tradition had undergone in the South which is revealed for instance in the depiction of industrialism and regionalism. In framing the novel's time and place, Glasgow situates Barren Ground squarely within its agricultural debate, noting that "thirty years ago, modern methods of farming, even methods that were modern in the benighted eighteen-nineties, had not penetrated to this thinly settled part of Virginia" (BG, 4). As Elizabeth Lay Green argues, "Dorinda's
long struggle with the land somehow resembles a success story from an agricultural magazine" (1925: 119). The pervasiveness of such readings prompted Glasgow to counter that her novel was not concerned with “systems of agriculture” (1943: 160). Unfortunately, many recent critics simply follow Glasgow’s lead, Frederick P.W. McDowell asserting that the text is “responsive to Southern agrarian sentiment” (1963: 147); Marcelle Thiebaux claiming that Dorinda is “the mythic, golden-age laborer, kin to and wedded to the soil, affirming the old agrarian values” (1982: 126); Tonette Bond concluding that the novel is meant “to accord with the pastoral ideal” (1979: 565). Such conclusions obscure how Barren Ground reflects its historical moment’s radical redefinition of agriculture, a redefinition which guaranteed the expansion of urban industry and led to the dispossession and displacement of millions.

Charles Josiah Galpin says that “the choice of butter-making as Dorinda’s road to success is no accident. Butter-making was quite amenable to the rationality, systematization, and control of industrial farming” (1922: 49). With the introduction of mechanical cream separators and milking machines, dairy herds expanded; milk was analyzed and classified. She standardizes her ‘creamy butter’ for the market by molding it and stamping it with “the name Old Farm beneath the device of a harp-shaped pine” — a nostalgic touch targeting wealthy urban diners, many probably only a generation or two removed from farming (BG, 303). Her standardization of Old Farm butter is in lockstep with the 1920s advice: in the words of Mary Meek Atkeson, “the wise country woman in putting up her products makes them look as nearly machine-made as possible” especially for the “city woman” who “lives in a machine-made world” (1924: 117).
The growth ideal of industrial agriculture, which glorifies the future by burying the past, serves as a foil for Dorinda's wish to bury her memories of Jason Greylock. For example, walking in a "scarred field" after her father's funeral, Dorinda encounters once again her painful past in the figure of Jason, who complains to her, "you've treated me as if I were the dirt under your feet" (BG, 300). She does not disagree, telling him that he means "just nothing" to her, and she turns her back on him knowing "the infinite relief of having love over" (BG, 301). After sometime, she triumphantly receives her first butter payment, and, echoing many progressive farmers, she declares, "If I didn't live in the future, I couldn't stand things as they are" (BG, 304). The rationality of progressive farming makes her life "one flawless pattern" (BG, 347); her celibate "marriage had made, after all, little difference in the orderly precision of her days" (BG, 387). And no emotion will halt her business: "Hearts might be broken, men might live or die, but the cows must be milked" (BG, 308). After burying Jason, "she faced the future without romantic glamour, but she faced it with integrity of vision. The best of life, she told herself with clear-eyed wisdom, was ahead of her" (BG, 510).

The individual human history which is emphasized again and again is presented by those who possess the "vein of iron." It is the struggle of individual will against individual emotion. Dorinda's "vein of iron" is at least in part hereditary. She "had inherited the impenetrable Scotch reserve on the subject of sentiment" (BG, 78). On one level Glasgow grounds this iron fortitude in the tenets of Presbyterianism; but the basis of the "vein of iron" in Dorinda transcends this strict religious limitation. Dorinda's virtue is also an indomitable force within herself as Glasgow says: "After all, it was not religion; it was not philosophy; it
was nothing outside her own being that had delivered her from evil. The vein of iron which had supported her through adversity was merely the instinct older than herself, stronger than circumstances, deeper than the shifting surface of emotion; the instinct that had said, 'I will not be broken.' Though the words of the covenant had altered, the ancient mettle still infused its spirit" (1954: 192). Thus, the “vein of iron” is a symbol for the survival instinct in Dorinda; it is not limited to Presbyterians, although that sect has been most successful in effecting its strong assertion.

In her own terms, Dorinda re-enacts the historical struggles of her ancestors. She carries on the battle at Pedlar’s Mill, a place where tenant farming, the effect of the Civil War, has all but ruined the land. It is worth noting that her struggle takes place during aftermath of one war and the duration of a second, grounding her personal struggle within the framework of social struggle. The Civil War brought about a change of system to tenant farming; World War I threatens the very land and the way of life with which Dorinda has affected her victory. The people at Pedlar’s Mill, on the whole, fight to stay in a rut, and it is against this symbolic destruction that Dorinda battles; but, significantly, the outward battle is paralleled by the more intense inner one. And Glasgow insists that this battle must be fought alone. Dorinda recognizes her love of solitude and the strength it imparts and the absolute separateness of the individual is, at the same time, part of the universal. She wonders: “Were people like this everywhere, all over the world, each one a universe in one’s self, separate like the stars in a vast emptiness?” (BG, 142). The validity of the complete separateness which is, paradoxically, the
universal is established as Dorinda, solitary and strong, weaves her personal 
history.

Dorinda is aware that her work is an escape from the thought which recalls 
memory but recognizes that for one who is through with emotion, her work must 
be her sole basis of happiness. She cannot ease her memory, but she can wait for it 
to lose its threatening immediately.

Dorinda’s reaction to World War I reflects her stoic acceptance of 
circumstances. “In the 
beginning the Germans had seemed less a mortal enemy than an evil spirit at large, and she had fought them as her great-grandfather might 
have fought a heresy or a pestilence” (BG, 357). The war does not touch her 
personality; it “came no nearer to her than a battle in history” (BG, 357). Her only 
interaction with the war comes in terms of crops; she can interact with life only in 
the impersonal terms of her material achievement. This reaction is part of and 
affected by the winding-down process in her personal history, which is effectively 
set against the winding down of social history before the resurgence of war. 
Neither war nor emotion can touch her deeply; rooted in the security of repression 
and personal disinterestedness, she has conquered the circumstances of her life. 
“She knew now that life would never be different. Experience, like love, would 
always be inadequate to the living soul” (BG, 364). With the end of her 
expectancy that life will somehow change comes Dorinda’s ultimate triumph over 
life, and reassertion of the validity of her ancestral heritage.

In the making of the history of her life Dorinda realizes that “Good and 
bad, right and wrong, they were all tangled together” (BG, 368). Her existence is
beyond morality just as the flow of history is beyond human evaluative terms. Near the end of *Barren Ground*, long after Dorinda has been seduced and abandoned by Jason, has fled to New York and miscarried Jason’s child, and has returned to Pedlar’s Mill to redeem her family’s land by turning it into a prosperous modern dairy farm, Dorinda, now the widow of Nathan Pedlar, thinks back over her year:

In her own life she could trace no logical connection between being and behavior, between the thing that she was in herself and the things she had done. She thought of herself as a good woman (there were few better ones, she would have said honestly) yet in her girlhood she had been betrayed by love and saved by the simplest accident from murder. Surely these were both flagrant transgressions according to every code of morality! They were acts, she knew, which she would have condemned in another; but in her memory they appeared as inevitable as the rest of her conduct, and she could not unravel them from the frayed warp-and-woof of the past (BG, 460).

Glasgow thought *Barren Ground* her best book; with its singleness and sobriety of vision, it is one of her strongest. During the hiatus in her creative energies which set in after the publication of *Virginia*, she evidently bore the idea for *Barren Ground* within her mind, but was unable to start writing on the book before 1921 or 1922. It was only when emotion waned that she repossessed her spirit and wrote *Barren Ground* as, among other things, a gesture of liberation. In a reminiscent letter to Signe Toksvig in 1944 she recalled that the novel “was torn out of myself.” Not only did the book set her free from her past and indicate the direction that her future might take, but it seemed to her to sum up all that was significant in her experience.

The impact of the novel, in large part, depends upon Glasgow’s skillful handling of the passage of time, so that the years go by naturally and inevitably. Time passes unobtrusively because the generations are linked with each other.
Thus Dorinda repeats enough of her parents' experiences to evolve in her own life a pattern similar to that found in her existence of the generations of her forebears. She concludes that the bleakness will end in the same round of ceaseless activity as had characterized her mother's life, to disguise a similar sense of unfulfillment. Time thus reduces the individual quality of experience to a less exciting racial norm. According to Frederick P.W. McDowell, "the unchanging aspect of time has for counterpart the unchanging aspect of the basic features in the landscape; thus time like the landscape which it has conditioned, seems to wear the aspect of eternity" (1963: 158). In the novel time and space unite and dwarf the significance of the human actors and their problems; in Glasgow's own words, "the land and the sky, time and space, are the great harmonies" to which the artist ought to be sensitive" (quoted in Frederick P.W. McDowell 1963: 158).

Although considered part of the women's trilogy, many biographers and literary scholars consider Barren Ground to be a break from Glasgow's earlier fifteen novels and the mark of her arrival at artistic maturity. It is a semi-autobiographical novel detailing thirty years in the life of Virginia farm girl Dorinda Oakley, who embodies Glasgow's own conflict between Old South nostalgia and New South realism. Although Oakley fights for her independence, she harbors a deep connection to the land. Barren Ground also reflects the early twentieth-century debate between farming as a business built on technological change and farming as a traditional way of life, supporting the view of industrialized agriculture as a positive force.
Glasgow's autobiographical story of Dorinda Oakley unfolds with great emphasis upon freedom of the will and other philosophical questions. Indeed, the narrator assumes the reader’s familiarity with terms such as habit, sensation, impression, instinct, and will, as they are variously employed in the context of Western philosophy. The novel even ventures to explore empiricist concepts of memory and personal identity as rooted in physiology rather than in some extent psychological presence called “self.” A careful reader of Darwin, Glasgow creates a narrator who ponders the implications of biological determinism in a universe that taunts us with the possibility of free will.

**VEIN OF IRON**

Glasgow wrote *Vein of Iron* in 1935, and the novel was placed second on the best-seller lists that year. It is typical of her work, which bridged the gap between serious and popular literature. This absorbing novel *Vein of Iron*, set in the historic Great Valley of Virginia during the years 1900 – 1932, centers on the love and marriage of Ada Fincastle, daughter of a hardy Scotch-Irish family. The Fincastles are descended from pioneer settlers who survived Indian wars and the rigors of frontier life. The hardships that Ada Fincastle faces during the early days of the Depression are no less severe, but she draws on the same vein of iron, the courage of generations, to endure and win. *Vein of Iron* has been widely praised as the finest work of Glasgow’s distinguished career.

Several family members get a great deal of attention in the novel. Ada Fincastle is a young woman in love with a young man named Ralph McBride. Initially she loses Ralph, as a result of a forced marriage to a rich, selfish girl, Janet Rowan, who claims that Ralph got her pregnant. She ultimately marries Ralph, but only after a two-day torrid affair in the woods before the divorce between Ralph and Janet is concluded. Ralph returns from the woods cynical and disillusioned and the couple struggle to retain their love for one another. Ada's father, John Fincastle, is the other major character in the story. Fincastle is a Presbyterian minister who has been defrocked “after he had told the Presbytery that he rejected the God of Abraham but accepted the God of Spinoza” (VI, 23). Fincastle has spent his life writing a multi-volume work of philosophy, heavily influenced by a combination of philosophical naturalism, German idealism, Spinoza, Schopenhauer, and, especially, Buddhism and Eastern thought. Glasgow herself was a religious seeker of an unorthodox cast who had been fascinated with Buddhism when young.

The main characters also include Ada's grandmother as well as Fincastle's wife, who dies early in the novel, and a character named Aunt Meggie, all of whom retain traditional Presbyterian religious convictions and all of whom are sympathetically portrayed. The most notable ancestors, as Ada's grandmother relates, are women. In the collective family memory, stories of brave women battling the “savages’ are more common than tales of male heroism. For example, Ada’s grandmother tells about “Mrs. Ettrick, a woman of great strength, was
surprised by a redskin when she was fording a creek, but she felled him with the 
single blow of a hatchet and galloped back to warn the men who bore muskets” 
(VI, 21). Much of the theme of the novel is stated in the title, as the characters, 
regardless of their differences in religious outlook, maintain their fortitude and 
strength in the face of difficulty, adversity, and change. Besides fortitude and 
interior toughness, the second major theme of the novel is human compassion. As 
the family suffers and observes the suffering of others during the Great Depression, 
John and Ada, in particular, come to realize and to put into practice the value of 
limiting one’s own egocentrism and trying to work to alleviate the sufferings of 
others. There is a Buddhist mantra that is repeated at several important places in 
this novel: “May all that have life be delivered from suffering” (VI, 58) — known 
as the loving kindness (or) meta meditation.

*Vein of Iron* has excellent descriptions of life in rural Virginia and of the 
growth of the urban South in a larger fictitious city called Queenborough. 
Industrialization and the suffering resulting from the Depression are portrayed 
well. There are also sympathetic, non-stereotyped portrayals of African-Americans 
in the novel. For all the descriptions of place and the intensity of the love story, 
the main focus of the novel was spiritual. Glasgow writes knowingly both of the 
loss of faith in traditional Western religions and also of the need for the spiritual 
values of wisdom, self-understanding, and compassion. The novel has a serious 
tone throughout and her quest remains distinctly modern.

Through *Vein of Iron* Ellen Glasgow moves the shuttle of time as she creates 
her fabric of human history. The Fincastles, like most of the inhabitants of Shut-in
Valley, have lived in the mountain valley region of Virginia since frontier times. All through the novel, Glasgow enriched her story of the Fincastles with accounts of their earlier, sterner days when Indians had carried off Great-great-grandmother Tod. From other stories current in her family, Ellen Glasgow drew the memories of Hunter's and Sheridan's Civil War depredations, and the essence of the early experience of the Fincastles. Mrs. McBride possesses the religious attitude of the author's father in her bitter worship of a God of Wrath rather than one of Love. And Mary Evelyn is endowed with the loveliness, charm, and sensitivity of the novelist's mother. Grandmother Fincastle seems an invention of the novelist's imagination — a creation shaped out of all the finer, if sterner, and richer, if harsher, qualities of those Scotch-Irish Calvinists whose "vein of iron" had been tempered in the furnace of experience. Grandmother Fincastle, the holder of memories and a representative of pioneer heritage, as well as the members of the yeomen middle class like Ada, gain strength for their present toil through links with the past.

These people have grown strong in their strict if tempered piety; but, although they are solid people of rich human quality, Mary Evelyn's gentle family of the Tidewater would not regard them as aristocratic. Furthermore, not all of these Scotch-Irish possessed the same "vein of iron" — the quality of fortitude and the belief in excellence — which belonged to the Fincastles. "There's one thing they can't take from us, and that's fortitude" (VI, 211), John Fincastle said proudly to his friend Old Mr. Midkiff. The phrase which serves as title had long been with Glasgow as an image of endurance in the face of disaster and of qualities of personality and character which inhered in some human stock and which might
sustain fortunate individuals. Moreover, Glasgow came to believe that this “vein of iron” belonged especially to the Scotch-Irish Calvinist settlers of Virginia from whom her father came. The complex of qualities it symbolized might be present in other human strains, but these hardy Christians seemed to exhibit it most often.

Her other characters had revealed their “veins of iron,” but the Fincastsles and their associates provided its most dramatic exhibition. Some like the Rowans are materialistic; although successful in accumulating the world’s goods, they are poor in spirit.

*Vein of Iron* is primarily a picture of a timeless spiritual quest. It encourages the reader away from the materialism of the everyday, whether found in rural Virginia or anywhere else, to search for meaning, wisdom, and compassion. Glasgow came to look back on her own past with increased nostalgia as she saw the effects of the new liberty of deportment and the new realism of expression that she had herself espoused. As Louis Auchincloss says, “once the note of shrillness, even of petulance, had entered her fiction it could only be lost when, as in the early chapters of *Vein of Iron*, she moved her setting back prior to those ills with which she now saw the world inundated” (1974: 186).

For Louis Auchincloss, “*Vein of Iron* seems a hollow echo of *Barren Ground*. It starts well enough, for it starts in the past, where as an older woman Glasgow was increasingly at home, and deals with people whom she had not treated before, the descendants of the Scotch-Irish settlers in the Southern part of the Virginia Valley” (1974: 188). This was where her father’s people had come from, and she was able effectively to evoke in the early chapters the bare, grim
Presbyterian elements of the Fincastle family and their village, called, with a labored appropriateness, Ironside. The characters who are hard are very hard, and those who are stoical are very stoical, and even the names of the surrounding geographical features suggest the somber spiritual atmosphere in which these joyless people live: God's Mountain, Thunder Mountain, Shut-in Valley. Mobs of shrieking children cast pebbles at idiots and unmarried mothers alike, “Children were chasing an idiot boy up the village street to the churchyard. 'Run, run, oh, what fun!’ sang little Ada Fincastle, as she raced with the pursuers” (VI,1). When Ada was in hurry to reach home as her grandmother was not well she pursued by children at churchyard. “While their eyes gleamed and their foolish mouths dribbled, a vivid memory crossed her mind of the day when she had chased Toby Waters, and had suddenly felt herself fleeing in the skin of the idiot, as she had fled once before in the skin of the hare” (VI, 134) though there are few of the latter, as a girl need only point to the man actually or allegedly responsible to have him dragged to the altar by her fellow villagers. “It seems possible that Glasgow may have written a bit too much of her father’s character into Ironside” (quoted in Louis Auchincloss 1974:189), but the result is very much alive. Such cannot be said of the second part of the novel, where the characters move to Queenborough and to the present. Ada Fincastle becomes a serial heroine, a soap-opera queen.

Ralph McBride is wrested from her by an unscrupulous girl friend, Janet and returns, a married man, to make her pregnant. Ironside spits at her, and her grandmother dies of the disgrace. Ralph eventually marries her, but war neuroses have made him moody and unfaithful, and in Queenborough, during the Depression, they are reduced to desperate want. Ralph, out driving with the girl
next door, is nearly paralyzed in an automobile accident. Yet Ada is always superb; her vein of iron sees her through. One does not see her, as one sees Dorinda in *Barren Ground*, working on her farm, milking cows, supervising the help, and purchasing new fields. But Ada relies simply on her inheritance of character.

In her preface to *Vein of Iron*, Glasgow remarked on how the novel’s locale differed from her other fiction: before this novel, set in the Valley of Virginia, she had “written only of the Tidewater and Richmond,” home of ‘my mother’s people’ (1943: 165). The valley was home to her father’s forebears, and it is significant that in the novel that she felt would be her last, she turned finally to examine a background steeped in associations with the man whom she personally rejected so vehemently. Glasgow used the properties of fiction to accomplish what she never satisfactorily managed in her personal relationship with her father, Francis Glasgow: an imaginative reclaiming of the part of her identity that she owed, through blood and training, to him. In the words of Dorothy M. Scura, “the reclaiming is accomplished by the unique affirmation that *Vein of Iron* makes of the idea of family as intergenerational community, matriarchally centered and inherited” (1995: 100).

*Vein of Iron* shows four different generations interacting in order to trace an ideal of what Glasgow called “fortitude” and to show its transmission as a force transcending specific manifestations in particular characters. As she explained in her preface, “from the beginning, I had known that I was engaged upon a family chronicle, that I was studying, not a single character or group of characters alone, but the vital principle of survival” (1943: 169). At the end of the novel, Ada
Fincastle follows her father back to their home in the mountain community of Ironside, and she articulates to herself her understanding of that principle of survival as a matriarchally charged force: remembering all her ancestors, but especially her grandfather Fincastle and great-great-grandmother Tod, "she had a sense, more a feeling than a vision, of the dead generations behind her. They had come to life there in the past; they were lending her their fortitude; they were reaching out to her in adversity, that was the heritage they had left for her. Ada’s long journey to this discovery makes *Vein of Iron* one of Glasgow’s most compelling studies of women’s experience, one that had particular relevance to her need to claim her whole past as writer.

In the first chapter, young Ada tells her minister that she is going out to watch for her father, who is bringing her a doll “with real hair” (VI, 7). She has earned the money for the doll herself and eagerly dreams of naming it as Flora and dressing her. When at last her father arrives, Ada finds that he has not saved enough money to buy her the doll with real hair; upon opening the package he gives her and seeing only a doll with painted china hair, she cries, “Oh, Mother, Mother, she isn’t real!” (VI, 15). It shows how passionate she was about a doll and never forgets it and the memory of a doll kills her appetite also. “On any other night, the child would have been the first in the kitchen, helping and watching, but she still suffered from the memory of Flora, and all her appetite seemed to have fled” (VI, 18).

The doll scene, which Glasgow uses in *Vein of Iron* as a kind of early touchstone to define the personalities of her two main characters, can be
scrutinized as well for its relation to her memory of her father's power and insensitivity. In *A Certain Measure*, Glasgow wrote, "I could well remember the hungry eighties; and I could remember, too, that when I wanted a doll with 'real hair,' I was told I could not have it because we had 'lost everything in the Civil War'" (1943: 12). She recollected her experiences in her childhood relationship with her father through this doll scene.

The five figures of Ada’s childhood family — grandmother, father, mother Mary Evelyn, Aunt Meggie, and Ada — are set consistently in relation to one another in terms of both their motivations and the consequences of their actions. At the beginning of the novel, Glasgow arranges these five around the fireplace in their small, cozy home in a scene that has no model in her earlier fiction. She called this section an innovation in which she was attempting "to enter completely into the mental processes of these five different human beings" (1943: 181). All five, dreaming by the fire, weave a tapestry of thoughts concerning goals, events, and feelings that the others' monologues echo. Grandmother, for instance, takes the family history far back in time, seeking, in memories of earlier Fincastles, to understand her rebellious son and her present circumstances. Through her memories she is "knitting her into the past as she knitted life into stockings, moved the familiar rhythms and pauses now—of the house; and moved as a casual wave, as barely a minute's ebbing and flow, in the timeless surge of predestination" (VI, 24), and she knits her family into her vision with

A closed memory, unfolded as a fan in her thoughts. She saw the pale red loop of the road round the manse on a spring morning, the narrow valley, deep as a river, and the Endless Mountains thronging under the April blue of the sky. More than fifty years ago, but it seemed only yesterday! From the
changeless past and the slow accretion of time, the day and the scene emerged into the firelight... from the falling leaves... and the sifting dust... and the cobwebs... and the mildew... (VI, 24).

This slow accretion of time has brought them all to their present configuration. John Fincastle remembers his grandmother, Margaret Graham, as he seeks to know “was this endless seeking an inheritance from the past? Was it a survival of the westward thrust of the pioneer?” (VI, 26).

Mary Evelyn measures all of her thoughts against her sense of how her mother-in-law would respond to them: “Mother Fincastle said all that was mere silliness” (VI, 28). All of them think of what John’s church trial for heresy has cost them, of Mary Evelyn’s failing health, of some aspect of their struggle with poverty. Ada, herself, who is ten years old at the time, brings her family into different focus through perceptions untempered by adult understanding. The effect of the section is to mark each character’s identity with something of all the others, so that neither time, nor distance, nor death can separate them. They endure in one another.

While Ada’s father will lead her back finally to her strong maternal ancestors as a source of strength, it is Ada who first leads her father away from that home for a kind of descent that provides a necessary testing and transformations for them both. Josephine Donovan has commented on the enactment of Demeter-Persephone myth that “Ada’s journey to the city represents” (1941:154); the years in Queenborough are “cast as a period of exile and a time of the fall” (VI, 154).

As outlined in Chapter I, Southern history is the framework for Ellen Glasgow’s fiction, especially in her two novels Barren Ground and Vein of Iron.
Ada's "vein of iron" has its symbolic assertion in the Manse. The house stands as testimony to the pioneer spirit of her ancestors. The Fincastles are defined by the endurance of and triumph over circumstance, and by the Presbyterianism in their blood. But in conflict with Ada's inherited ancestral reserve is her intense desire for joy. As in Dorinda, the desire for joy is constantly thwarted by iron reserve, and Ada must wage a re-enactment of the basic struggle of history. What Ada must find, as her grandmother has found, is faith in the continuity of history. She must realize that in her individual pain and vitality she is part of her place: as an individual she operates alone and universally at the same time. It was not possible for her to forget Manse. As Dorinda relies upon a mythical attachment to place, Ada draws upon her cultural and ancestral past to establish ties with her pioneer forbears. Even her ancestors also never come out of their past so easily. The pioneers were hard in character, unlovable but heroic. Ada must answer her own: "Was the past broken off from the present? She mused, or did that vein of iron hold all the generations together?" (VI, 126). The moments and the place of emotional involvement reverberate throughout her life. Any attempt to intellectualize sensation into non-existence is unsuccessful; she will hear Ralph's footsteps "eternally passing in and out of her life" (VI, 93). Even with her marriage to Ralph, the pangs of memory and the conflict they call remain vital; only the terms of the conflict change.

Ada, during the moments of passion for Ralph, is haunted by the relentless conflict. Telling herself that "This is love, this delight" (VI, 107), her desire is kept under control; and "As long as she lived, her will would have a part, perhaps an immortal part, in this place and this moment" (VI, 114). But Ada does not have
complete control over the memory of love. For both Dorinda and Ada the memory of sensation is an unexpected haunt. But unlike Dorinda, Ada retains her love and therefore her basic need is not so much to suppress emotion as it is to accept it in a changed form: she must end the expectancy of its return in its original vitality. During the years in Queenborough Ada endures the struggle of the contradictory elements of desire and will, and the always-disappointed expectancy of the return of past vitality. "Then fortitude, which lies beyond courage, would renew itself from some inexhaustible spring of vitality. Lying there in the June sunshine, between the fruitful earth and the clement sky, it seemed to her that a sense of the past would overflow and obliterate her actual share in the present" (VI, 128).

Ada’s history is inextricably tied to that of her ancestors. She and her family bring wallpaper and Ada’s blue bowl from the Manse to the city. Ada recognizes the transcendent value of the bowl: “I’ve held on to my blue-bowl, she thought, just as Great-great grandmother Tod held on to her cameo brooch among savages. We held on because they were symbols” (VI, 194). The importance of symbols of the ancestral past is paralleled by Ada’s assertion of total individuality which is, paradoxically, universality.

After visiting relatives in the city whom she thought would be able to help her friends financially, and finding her relatives unable to help, Ada finds another romantic dream shattered. She reflects on the separateness of the individual: “Each human being lived in its own cell of clay, confined within an inert speck of creation, and indifferent to the other millions of cells by which it was surrounded” (VI, 206). Ada must return home in order to bring to a point of unity the symbols
of the past and the separateness of the individual. The symbols of her heritage retain meaning in the city, but apart from her roots she feels that "life had lost a sense of permanence, of continuing tradition" (VI, 206).

In the city, the stage of her drama, she encounters a force against which to fight. Like the broomsedge for Dorinda, the mechanism of the city is the outward symbol of Ada's inner struggle. Having won the materialistic battle of creating a home amid machines, she can return home to regain that lost piece of self without fear of being overwhelmed by the memory of passion that is tied to place. The "vein of iron," even if it doesn't permit permanence of passion, gives her something that endures. She recollected how her grandmother and father were settled up in Ironside and become rich. Looking at the Manse, the symbol of her heritage, she feels "This was the heritage they had left. She could lean back on their strength; she could recover that lost certainty of a continuing tradition" (VI, 237). Her "vein of iron" asserts its lasting power even though its iron quality has been tempered from that in Dorinda.

Glasgow asserts in *The Woman Within* that "surely one of the peculiar habits of circumstances is the way they follow, in their eternal recurrence, a single course. If an event happens once in a life, it may be depended upon to repeat later its general design" (1954: 133). She apparently translated this sense of the movement of personal history into a structural and thematic aesthetic in *Barren Ground* and *Vein of Iron*. As Judy Smith Murr comments, "the lives of Dorinda Oakley and Ada Fincastle adhere to and are structured by a theory of history which insists that individual history is an endless, repetitive pattern of human endeavor, always
ending in less than fulfillment, against the conflicting forces of will and desire” (1975: 39).

Both *Barren Ground* and *Vein of Iron* are controlled by Glasgow’s conception of history asserted aesthetically and thematically in Dorinda and Ada. The flow of their individual histories controls the structure of the novel as a whole. In both novels the strong, reserved community and the prevalent Presbyterian heritage are a brilliant backdrop for the elemental conflict between will and desire. The imaginative world Glasgow creates in the two novels defines and is defined by this struggle, as are the individuals who wage it. The social world parallels the particular symbols of the individual struggle: the land and broomsedge in *Barren Ground*, mechanism in *Vein of Iron*. According to Judy Smith Murr, “by placing the characters in an imaginative universe controlled by an overriding historical continuum, and in which place is primarily a symbol, Glasgow succeeds in rendering them universal and, for the most part, escapes the frequently stated charge of creating characters who are diminished by setting” (1975: 42).

Ada Fincastle in *Vein of Iron* is, like Dorinda in *Barren Ground*, a contradictory mixture of the “vein of iron” and impassioned impulse. These qualities are at least in part hereditary: Margaret Graham said that Glasgow had “infused a romantic legend, as well as an aristocratic strain, into the Fincastle stock” (2006: 124), and great-great-grandmother Tod was known to be subject to “wildness.” Ada has also inherited ‘some deep reserve’ which is continually in conflict with her impulse. Judy Smith feels that, “Ada, like Dorinda, is engaged by
the irreconcilable difference between human being and human nature and will wage the same elemental battle” (quoted in Judy Smith Murr 1975:49).

In these works Glasgow follows the basic pattern of cataclysm, out of which comes a reverberating conflict, leveling off, and winding down. In Vein of Iron Ada’s personal history becomes part of the universal. Judy Smith comments that “like Barren Ground, Vein of Iron closes with its protagonist facing middle age and the winding-down process where the painful echoes of memory and expectancy grow progressively fainter. Ada, like Dorinda, is granted permanence and significance by her part in the repetitious re-enactment of human history” (1975: 53). In these novels Glasgow firmly establishes the vitality of the inescapable past, the continuity of a fortitudinous heritage, and the value of the endless struggle. Both Dorinda and Ada, Glasgow’s iron-veined individuals, assert a theory of history which places primacy on the individual. Glasgow’s novels show how the universal pattern must be vitalized on the personal level; so that the individual historical conflict ensures humanity of a definition of its own history.

The discussion in the second chapter focused on Glasgow’s two novels Barren Ground and Vein of Iron. Glasgow’s handling of history, time, family, myth and place, conscious and unconscious memories of the past, while characterizing Dorinda and Ada, makes the reading of the novels an enriching experience.