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Ellen Glasgow's *In This Our Life*:  
"The Betrayals of Life" in the Crumbling Aristocratic South

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**Abstract**

Ellen Glasgow's works have received, over time, a mixed interpretation, from sentimental and conventional, to rebellious and insightful. Her novel *In This Our Life* (1941) allows the reader to have a glimpse of the early twentieth-century South, changed by the industrial revolution, desperately clinging to dead codes, despairing and struggling to survive. The South is reflected through the problems of a family, its sentimentality and vulnerability, but also its cruelty, pretensions, masks and selfishness, trying to find happiness and meaning in a world of traditions and codes that seem powerless in the face of progress. The novel, apparently simple and reduced in scope, offers, in fact, a deep insight into various issues, from complicated family relationships, gender pressures, racial inequality to psychological dilemmas, frustration or utter despair. The article's aim is to depict, through this novel, one facet of the American South, the "aristocratic" South of belles and cavaliers, an illusory representation indeed, but so deeply rooted in the world's imagination. Ellen Glasgow is one of the best choices in this direction: an aristocratic woman but also a keen and profound writer, and, most of all, a writer who loved the South deeply, even if she exposed its flaws.

**Keywords:** the South, aristocracy, cavalier, patriarchy, southern belle, women, race, illness

The American South is an entity recognizable in the world imagination due to its various representations in fiction, movies, politics, entertainment, advertisements, etc.: white-columned houses, fields of cotton, belles and cavaliers served by benevolent slaves, or, on the contrary, poverty, violence and lynching. All these are part of an imaginary space we all recognize but fail to know in its complexity. In fact, the South seems to elude a clear definition, remaining mysterious,

paradoxical and almost intangible. A “monolithic,” coherent and unified vision of the South, adhering to a single set of values, traditions and customs is nowadays challenged, as other visions and voices claim their participation in the definition of the Southern identity. Therefore, a more complex (but never complete or definitive) understanding of this elusive, yet utterly fascinating regional identity emerges from the inclusion of diverse cultures, images, reflections and points of view.

The main point of dispute between modern re-definitions of the South and traditional views is the “white, aristocratic” identity which was the region’s first important and widely recognizable representation. Apparently in opposition to the democratic creed of the American republic, the “aristocratic” ideal emerged out of the proslavery argument and of the sectional dispute between the North and the South in the first half of the nineteenth century, culminating with the Civil War. At the time, it functioned as an ideological defense in the sectional conflict between the South and the North and continued to survive, after the Civil War, as the stronghold of differentiation and preservation of a distinct, unvanquishable identity. Seen as an “unwritten code that had been borrowed from the European aristocracy and superimposed upon a New World plantation society” (Watson 6), the aristocratic ideal represented the worldview of the planter class who held the economic and political power and who also imposed their perspectives on the other inhabitants of the South. William Taylor mentions some of the main factors that led to the creation of such a myth: “the economy of the South was less diversified, its population was more dispersed, its wealth more concentrated, its democracy less complete, and its cultural attainments by comparison were negligible. Most important of all, close to a third of its population lived in a condition of chattel slavery” (17). In such a highly stratified society, it was much easier for the wealthy class to impose its vision and create an aristocratic illusion which was meant to delineate the superiority of the Southerners who faced the growing waves of criticism of the Northern abolitionists.

Most modern and contemporary writers have reacted against this creed, suggesting that the South is more than white, or aristocratic, and consequently, various groups have started to claim their participation in

the construction of regional definition, offering their own views on what it is supposed to mean. And yet, in spite of these modern revisions of the South, it is undeniable that the “aristocratic” component still pervades the imagination of writers and readers alike, surviving the proslavery argument and the Civil War, surviving the Reconstruction and the passage of the Southern economy towards modernity, surviving even the segregation and the struggle for emancipation of the African Americans.

In the gallery of Southern writers, Ellen Glasgow is one who might rightfully claim her descent from an “aristocratic” family. Part of the Virginia Tidewater upper class, she enjoyed all the benefits of wealthy and genteel upbringing. In spite of such a heritage, though, Glasgow does not fulfill our expectations of “moonlight and magnolias” melodramas, neither does she look nostalgically on the Old South and its ways. On the contrary, without disregarding her social heritage, she chose to write about the South critically, but not destructively or hatefully, being animated by the desire to right its wrongs, expose its flaws, and show its strengths. In Hugh Holman’s words, she tried to cover the social history of Virginia, “a history of manners that would embrace those aspects of life with which [she] was acquainted” (111).

Born at the end of the nineteenth century in an upper-class family in Richmond, Virginia, she lived through troubled times, when the nineteenth-century traditional Victorian lifestyle was no longer a valid option for the young generation who was already experiencing a sense of loss, depersonalization, and anxiety, enhanced by the two World Wars. She was expected to become a belle, marry into a rich and respectable family, be a wife, a mother and carry on the tradition of the Virginian Tidewater aristocracy she had inherited. Instead, she ended up a successful writer, a sharp businesswoman and a fighter for the rights of those marginalized and oppressed, forging a life of her own, away from constraints and traditions. She rebelled against patriarchy, hypocrisy and injustice, but, at the same time, she loved the South and her attachment is visible in her fiction. Glasgow’s writings are marked by dualities: between her belonging to the tradition of Southern writing, a decisive factor in her becoming a writer, and her position at the crossroads of history, between

tradition and modernity, conformity and rebellion, passéism and progress, nostalgia and optimism.

Her life and work, influenced both by her heritage and by her peculiar position in Southern/American history, seem to be shaped by three important components: being a Southerner, being a woman, and belonging to the upper class. First, she is a Southerner deeply attached to her land, her writings being defined by many features we consider Southern: “a tragic sense of life, a deep-rooted pessimism, a recognition of human capacity for evil, and the decrees of history and place” (Goodman 1), coupled with a deep understanding of human nature. As an aristocrat, she was influenced by her belonging to a tradition that had already traced a path for her future destiny, as queen of the domestic realm. As a woman, she disliked this tradition, especially seeing its hypocrisy, translated into the marginalization of women, lack of empathy for the other, conventionality and superficiality. Anne Goodwyn Jones highlights the tensions that Glasgow herself must have felt, trapped, as she was, between her traditional upbringing and her inner ambitions: “caught between white supremacy and female inferiority, her loyalties to her race might well conflict with her loyalties to her sex. She was torn, too, between her love for the men and boys central in her life ... and her perhaps buried anger at the repressiveness implicit in their reverence and the fear implicit in their habit of commanding her” (24). Her novels, therefore, betray her rebellion against a South of conventions and hypocrisy, but also suggest a distrust in the shallow promises of modernity.

The novel *In This Our Life*, published in 1941, at the end of her career, is the result of a long effort, the writer’s failing health causing many interruptions and preventing the thorough revisions she had done to her other novels. Though it was quickly adapted for the silver screen and the writer received a long-due Pulitzer Prize in 1942, the novel was not welcomed by the critics with the same enthusiasm as her earlier works. Glasgow decided to write a sequel entitled *Beyond Defeat*, published posthumously, in order to offer her main characters a sense of closure. Under the guise of a domestic story focusing on the romantic entanglements of two sisters and their interchanged lovers/husbands, the

novel offers much more than drama and romance, as the writer turns it into a very subtle representation of the South at the end of the thirties. The problems, frustrations and disillusionments of the Timberlake family are set against the background of a changing world, moving too quickly into a modernity that offers nothing but dehumanization, loss of empathy and manners.

The novel is mainly narrated by Asa Timberlake, a man in his sixties, who appears to be the spokesman of Glasgow's own disillusionment as she chronicles "the maladjustments of modern man to the world outside him, maladjustments engendered by his sense of outrage at the disproportion between his expectations from life and the oppressive realities he confronts" (McDowell 216). A Southern drama, however, is incomplete without the racial component, and this novel constitutes Glasgow's "most daring exploration of Southern racial hypocrisy" (Raper 415), in which the family tensions are undercut by the racial conflict that "provides a mirror of the conscience of the family, of Virginia, and, by implication, of America" (Raper 417). Involved in a hit-and-run accident that resulted in the death of a little girl, the spoiled darling of the family, Stanley Timberlake, cold-heartedly blames Parry, a black young man, in order to avoid responsibility. The family, once disunited by Stanley's stealing her sister's husband and then causing his suicide, becomes suddenly united, appealing to the old Southern codes that protect the white at the cost of sacrificing the black victim. It is the moment when morality and civilization are tested, setting the stage for the fight between the old racist codes that have supported white supremacy and the values of justice and virtue that defy race or family in the name of humanity and righteousness.

The choice of such a narrator is indicative for Glasgow's purpose to investigate the true meaning of Southern aristocracy. Asa Timberlake is a descendant of an old, respectable family that could rightfully be included in the traditional Dixie gentile society. As such, he becomes a spokesman of the traditional South confronted with the two recurrent dilemmas of the white Southerner, often depicted in the fiction of the region: attachment to the family, honor and tradition, and race solidarity, seen as the imposition and protection of white supremacy at any cost. This racial conflict is

inevitable in a context in which two races have coexisted since the settlement of the American colonies, but never on an equal par. By setting her story not in times of slavery, the golden age of Southern aristocracy, but in the twentieth century, Glasgow investigates the dire consequences of the aristocratic illusions that keep promoting white supremacy, racism and immorality while dragging the sins of the slave age into the modern world. For Glasgow, the old Southern codes and traditions are not the mark of civilization, or aristocratic values; on the contrary, they seem to perpetuate a world of injustice, racism and intolerance. She, then, sets out to criticize both the old Southern aristocratic myth founded on a patriarchal system that relied on the marginalization and subservience of the gendered and racial other, and modern impatience, lack of empathy and carelessness, marks of a new, but not necessarily a better world. In order to achieve this goal, Glasgow structures her novel on doubles and mirrored images that demythologize the old Southern aristocracy seen, here, through the prism of its two most important components: the patriarch and the belle.

By adding to this representation the racial conflict in the presence of the black victim, scapegoat for the white's sins, she further grounds her story in a typical Southern context, since the very idea of aristocracy in this region would be meaningless without the racial component. In other words, since its creation, early in the nineteenth century, the aristocratic myth relied on the plantation economy, class- and race-based hierarchical structures and chattel slavery. Race, therefore, is an integral part of this complicated construct. The white plantation owner – the patriarch, the white lady – the belle, and the black slave/servant have been widely recognizable and almost inseparable figures of Southern fiction, since the beginnings of the plantation romance in the early nineteenth century, up to contemporary depictions, though the manner in which they were handled varied widely from writer to writer, from age to age. Even though Glasgow appeals to these Southern types, she switches the focus, seeing aristocracy not as a social class, but as a moral concept, applicable to those who fight injustice, support the values of civilization and believe in the importance of love. A reading of the novel following these two important components of the Southern aristocratic myth: the cavalier and

the belle, enriched with racial and moral dilemmas, proves enlightening for a deeper understanding of Glasgow's South, a world in need of change and reform in which, against all odds, honor and chivalry still exist.

The Southern cavalier, the patriarch, is differently embodied by two characters: Asa Timberlake and William Fitzroy. The former is an impoverished descendent of a once important family, a loving, honorable and loyal man, but too weak and poor to be able to make important changes in his life. The latter, William Fitzroy, is the "pillar" of Queenborough society (Glasgow 13; 254), a rich man and a Southern patriarch obsessed with power and control. These two characters are facets of the traditional Southern cavalier, typical of nineteenth century Southern fiction, deconstructed by Glasgow in order to show both his strengths and failures.

The Southern cavalier, emerging out of the nineteenth-century pro-slavery writings, is not only "the ideal representative of his race and class," but also "a masculine ideal" (Tracy 214). He is expected to be courageous, just, mannered and honorable, courteous to women and a defender of respectability, traditions and patriarchal authority. The family (his own and the enlarged family including the plantation slaves) becomes the basic unit of the Southern patriarchal world, a devious representation, after all, as it relied on the positive depiction of a loving family only to justify a system of oppression and violence mainly towards the black slaves, but also towards others (women, children, poor whites). Due to her heritage, Glasgow knew that the family metaphor for the South does not necessarily suggest strength and respectability; on the contrary, it hides weaknesses, racism and intolerance. From Uncle William's assertion "I like a woman to be womanly" (Glasgow 248), to Charlotte's claim that there is no harm in throwing the blame on Parry, because "coloured people don't feel things the way we do" (Glasgow 516), up to the representatives of the official authority who "chivalrously regretted the necessity to release Parry and charge a white girl in his place" (Glasgow 523), it becomes clear that the Southern world is not as modern as Asa felt at the beginning. Unfortunately, the old codes that require women to be pretty, weak and submissive and black people to function as scapegoats for the sins of the white still appear to hold in times of crisis. This is not,

Glasgow bitterly argues, an adherence to tradition, but a selfish way to preserve white supremacy. By using the conventions of the domestic novel, therefore, the writer suggests that the problems of the Southern society are deeply rooted in its very core: the family unit.

The most powerful representative of this patriarchal world is William Fitzroy, a typical “robber baron;” rich, well-connected, authoritative, he condones dreams of immortality by preferring the company of young people and believes in his absolute power which resides in his wealth. He becomes a symbol of the rapacious industrialization that destroys the Arcadian way of life of the old world, its beauty and tranquility. From the very beginning of the novel, the reader is confronted with an old world torn to pieces, old buildings demolished, and old trees uprooted to make way for “a new service station, flaunting a row of red pumps in front of a stucco arch” (Glasgow 3). The “white columns,” typical of any Southern tableau, need to make way for progress, and Uncle William is the patriarch of this new steel plantation: an impersonal and ugly modernity. Just like the old sycamores and willows falling to the ground, nothing seems to stand in the way of Uncle William’s will. Thus, while Asa ponders on this destruction of the traditional world, he secretly feels that there is still a place William’s will and his vision of modernity cannot reach: Hunter’s Fare and Kate. The farm of a widowed family friend, outside Queensborough, the town where the characters’ dramas unfold, offers Asa support and tranquility and the hope of a meaningful existence in the countryside. By creating this haven outside the city, “Glasgow juxtaposed the family created by male-controlled industrial Queenborough with that evolved from the female-centered agrarian home” (Levy 125), suggesting that there might be hope for a better life. Unfortunately, under the controlling influence of Uncle William, and in need of his money and support, Asa and all the other characters accept the yoke and fit into their submissive, traditional roles, bending to the patriarch’s will. This is the reason why Roy, Asa’s daughter and William’s niece, bitterly comments “I hate ... to have to live in a man’s world” (Glasgow 330).<sup>1</sup>

The rottenness of the world represented by Uncle William is also suggested by his physical appearance, that of a once “huge unwieldy man”



(Glasgow 69) whose body is eaten by a cancer he cannot cure with all his money. A colossus with feet of clay, Uncle William cannot fight the passage of time or the devastation of the terrible disease, reminding Asa of the “brute nobility of a wounded, dying bull” (Glasgow 436). William is a static character, incapable to feel empathy, or to change. Eaten by disease, but refusing to relinquish his control over the others, William is a grotesque symbol of the Old South: the slave-owner’s mentality surviving unchanged into the new world and keeping it from moving into modernity. He also refuses to let the others change, erroneously thinking that, as long as he is in control, he is immortal.

The counterpart of this rapacious Southern patriarch is Asa Timberlake, the reflector of the novel and, in many ways, a true cavalier, despite his lack of financial means and authority. Blair Rouse includes him in the gallery of “civilized men,” considering that “Asa Timberlake is that rarity among modern human beings: a good man, who has the strength of his goodness. His is the virtue of the civilized man who possesses compassion, pity, and the perceptive wisdom that enables him to pierce beneath the pretentious surfaces of most of his associates” (150).

Like a true Southern aristocrat, Asa feels more connected to his family’s tradition, often remembering the past (a constant in Southern fiction), his parents, and reappraising his heritage. Belonging to a once important family who used to be “the top of creation” (Glasgow 4), Asa retains not the greedy desire to control the others, but a sense of nobility and duty towards this heritage. According to Frederick McDowell, this “sense of continuity is not emotional but moral and takes compulsive form in a sense of responsibility by which Asa, withstanding the pressures upon him, holds together his identity. His sense of the sanctity of the individual, his conviction that man has an inherent dignity, also derives from the chivalric tradition at its best” (221).

However, this positive representation should not be mistaken for a nostalgic return to an idealized aristocracy, depicted in the manner of the plantation romancers of the nineteenth century. Asa, who bears the name of a Biblical patriarch, with all his weaknesses, frustrations, doubts and fears, is a pillar, not of Southern respectability, as Uncle William claims to be, but of civilization and humanity, which distinguishes him sharply

from the rich magnate. For Asa, tradition also means the power to endure, self-discipline, abidance to a code of conduct which does not necessarily bring happiness but is the foundation of a moral order and of civilization. As Glasgow confessed in a letter, the main theme of the novel is “the conflict of human beings with human nature” (qtd. in Bufkin 259). Many of the characters of the novel give in to their instincts, mainly William Fitzroy and Asa’s daughter, Stanley. By contrast, Asa tries to control his nature out of the belief that order and morality, as foundations of civilization, are more important. As he puts it, “the denial of one’s nature ... is not the worst. The worst is to feel that the moral universe, the very foundation of all order has trembled, has toppled over, has vanished” (Glasgow 66).

Asa Timberlake, therefore, reflects the writer’s beliefs that the spiritual is humanity’s highest aim and instincts must be controlled for the spirit to triumph: “the worth of the individual, man or woman, was determined by his constant effort to achieve, by his unwavering courage to fight on in spite of obstacles, and by his eventual spiritual success” (Stone 295). In the novel, Asa is the one who demonstrates his worth by having the courage to rise above his personal feelings (love for his daughter, allegiance to the family) in order to save an innocent man. If “truth, justice, loyalty and courage” as well as “restraint, forbearance and consideration for all” are the pillars of democracy and civilization (Stone 297), then he is one of the worthiest representatives of these noble values. Therefore, he remains “a civilized man in an uncivilized world” (Rouse 151), dominated by instincts, fulfillment of one’s desires, financial interests and material standards.

The second Southern component present in Glasgow’s novel, alongside the *cavalier*, and complementing him, is the *belle*. Based on the Victorian “angel in the house” tradition, the Southern belle is one of the most easily recognizable symbols of the South. More of a fictional construct than a palpable reality, the belle becomes a symbol of the values and virtues of the South: “the image wearing Dixie’s Diadem is not a human being, it is a marble statue, beautiful and silent, eternally inspiring and eternally still. Rather than a person, the Confederate woman is a personification effective only as she works in others’ imagination” (Jones

4); as such, the idealized image of the Southern lady “represents her culture’s idea of religious, moral, sexual, racial, and social perfection” (Jones 9).

The novel depicts the changing views on women in the first half of the twentieth century: the traditional (Victorian) one, submissive and domestic, and the emergence of the “new woman”: independent, assertive, rebelling against the patriarchal system. The real *belle* of the novel is Asa’s dead mother. Her absence from the novel makes her an ideal that is difficult to reach. According to Minerva, the black servant, “The Lord don’t make ’em like that any longer. I can recollect just as well the way Ma used to let me peep in the door when young Miss was all dressed up to go out in the evening. She’d look like she was made of roses, and she was smelling like a rose too” (Glasgow 82-3). Elusive and fragile like a rose, Asa’s mother lives in the memories of those who loved her, and so, she becomes an unattainable ideal for any living woman.

Most of the novel’s women: Charlotte, William Fitzroy’s wife, Lavinia, Asa’s wife, Stanley, his daughter, even Maggie, his daughter-in-law, accept the traditional system that relies on women’s dependence on male benevolence and protection. In this context, Aunt Charlotte seems to be, in many ways, the closest to the Southern ideal: a belle turned into a respectable matron. According to Asa, Aunt Charlotte had been beautiful in youth, before growing fat. She was, probably, a Southern belle marrying into a rich family, but failing to fulfill the duty of a woman of her race and class: that of producing an heir for William Fitzroy. This failure is symbolized by the loss of both her beauty and her importance for her husband. In order to keep her position of wife of a respectable and rich man, Charlotte, a strong and capable woman, artfully plays the part of the weak, incapable, totally subdued to her husband’s will: “For years Asa suspected that she was by no means as simple as she pretended to be, and then suddenly, when William was absent one day, he had seen her display actual intelligence and a firm hand with an emergency” (Glasgow 71). The art of disguise is learnt and practiced by the Southern belles who know that “winning Dixie’s Diadem means effacing oneself” (Jones 8) or hiding one’s identity and becoming the husband’s ornament for the sake of wealth, stability and respectability. Living in a world of double

standards, in which they do not have the same rights as men, but they have to accept this injustice with a gracious smile, “Southern ladies ... found it imperative, if they were to preserve their status and their sanity, to dissimulate” (Good 74). Charlotte is one of those typical ladies who became a master of dissimulation: “early in her married life, she had learned that the ways of circumventing a husband are many and varied” (Glasgow 147). Her actions seem to be driven by fear, as Asa discovers: “Charlotte started to speak, but the next instant she altered her mind and bit back her words. Instead, she turned an unpolemical glance on Asa; and he understood that fifty years in the thorough training of wifehood had taught her to value peace above firm convictions” (Glasgow 251). The visible result of years of frustration and dissimulation is hypochondria. In time, Charlotte develops the fear that she is going to fall ill and die of cancer, and she is always cautious, slow in movement, appearing to the others as weak and fragile. This physical fragility is, in fact, meant to “cloak the steely strength with the delicate covering of a magnolia bud” (Good 75), weakness becoming a shield, a protective weapon in front of the husband’s tyrannical will. The years of oppression have, unfortunately, blunted her spirit so much that, in the moments of crisis, she chooses to support the system that constrained her, and side with her husband and the rest of the family in their attempt to protect Stanley and throw the blame on an innocent man.

Weakness and illness seem to be common features of most women in the novel: Charlotte is afraid of cancer, Asa’s mother suffered from the nerves after her husband’s suicide, Stanley turns to alcohol and medication, and Lavinia spends her days in her room pretending to be weak and suffering, but proving strong enough to terrorize the others. Katherine Seidel argues that “the Old South wanted its women to be pure and chaste ideals of spirituality, but this demand can produce women who denigrate and deny the physical, and whose behavior therefore exhibits the tensions that such repression causes – a tendency to be ‘high strung,’ nervous, hysterical, hypochondriacal” (xv). Emma Dominguez-Rué supports the idea, considering that the idealization of women was in sharp contrast with the tensions arising from wifehood and motherhood and resulted in various illnesses, mental and physical (426). Therefore, the

invalidism of these women may represent a response to the world in which they are living. The illnesses that they have, or rather pretend to have, elicit the care and compassion of the others, being a method through which they easily achieve their aims through emotional blackmail, since they cannot do that in their own right. Roy, Asa's elder daughter, on the other hand, who refuses to publicly display her feelings and show her weaknesses, is always sacrificed to the benefit of her dissembling sister, and always accused of being too cold and unfeminine.

Of all the women in the novel, the main target of Glasgow's criticism seems to be Lavinia, Asa's wife. According to McDowell, Lavinia, in her mental sickness, "symbolizes the human condition in the present age" (216) also representing "all those implacable, impersonal forces which have defeated him [Asa], uniting as she does a reverence both for fossilized convention and for the materialistic standards imposed by modern industrialism" (217). As such, Lavinia represents all the hypocrisy, intolerance and egotism that the Southern aristocratic tradition tries to mask under a veil of respectability. Bowing to her uncle's will, because she knows he is a constant source of money and support, she emotionally blackmails her husband, Asa, with her pretense illness, knowing well that this is the only way she can keep him married to her.

Stanley, her daughter, follows her example. Considered by critics a "happiness hunter" (Levy 125), she seems to want only what she does not have, discarding man after man in a vain pursuit of happiness. Spoiled and shallow, she easily plays the part of the victim, allowing the men around her (mainly Uncle William and Craig, but also others, such as the policemen investigating the hit-and-run accident) to become the knights in shining armor hurrying to her rescue. She never cares if she hurts those around her, but, unfortunately, nothing can bring her happiness. Following the example of her mother, "Stanley is created—the passive is the appropriate voice—by male desire" (Levy 125), representing the perfect outcome of the patriarchal system, but also its perfect victim. She never relied on herself, always expecting others to right her wrongs and assume responsibility for her deeds. When her father finally refuses to stand by her side at the expense of another man's life, she does not know what to

do, and so she falls into the solution of women of her family: weakness, medication, and an almost imbecile refusal to acknowledge to fact:

“‘How did she stand it?’

A vacant smile moved Roy’s lips. ‘Beautifully. The doctor gave her more bromide. She is asleep now.’” (Glasgow 526)

Without more information about Stanley’s future, the readers are, however, allowed to imagine that nothing serious will happen to her: she will probably be saved by William’s money and influence, by her position in the society, by her artfully playing the role of a weak woman under the effects of alcohol, drugs and depression. Everything will be all right, as her former lover, Craig, puts it, as it always is for the rich and white in the South.

Roy stands apart from this group of women. Independent, strong-willed and honest, she rejects patriarchy, hates living in a world of men, loathes being pitied, even by her father, and tries to forge an independent life, away from the stifling traditions of her class. Deeply in love with her husband, Peter, she grants him the divorce as soon as she finds out he loves her sister, Stanley. This is not an action prompted by spite, or hatred, but by love, wanting him to be happy. She bears her cross in silence, without lamentation, and later, after Peter commits suicide, she stands by her sister, comforting her. Life brings her closer to Craig, Stanley’s former fiancée, but she is disappointed again, when Craig allies with the others in support of Stanley. These series of disappointments harden her heart, and she leaves her home and family after a one-night stand with an unknown man. Roy resembles more her father, but, too young and inexperienced, she is incapable of understanding the complexities of life in the same way her father does. As a result, Roy goes to the other extreme in her rejection of support and love. Though Roy is a far more likeable character than the other women of the novel, Glasgow also criticizes “the egotism of the modern woman” which is “sharply underlined in Stanley” but also in Roy, for whom “the jungle law of survival has replaced the old family ties. Thus, in her final novels Miss Glasgow presents, through this family, a vision of a world in which the

traditional bonds are being destroyed and in which a vicious egotism has been loosed" (Becker 302).

Old and young, weak or strong-willed, all the women in the novel seem to fail in adapting to the modern world. Lavinia, Charlotte and Stanley cling to an old aristocratic tradition that keeps women weak, dependant and ornamental, but safe from trouble and responsibility, a tradition Glasgow rejected from the beginning of her career, even though she belonged to it. Roy, on the other hand, is too inflexible, discarding the proofs of love that could soothe her wounded heart. Fearing to be too "womanly," she almost loses her femininity. Thus, she chooses the path of independence out of disappointment, and it does not bring her happiness or fulfillment.

The only one who seems to offer an alternative to these feminine models is Kate Oliver of Hunter's Fare. Calm, wise, independent, yet feminine, she represents the benevolent and soothing matriarchy that could save Asa from his dissatisfying existence. However, Kate is as much an ideal and a dream as Asa's mother was, and happiness appears as unattainable as any illusion. This is the reason why Kate's physical presence in the novel is rather episodic, and she lives more in Asa's thoughts, as an ideal to be cherished, but always fading into the distance.

The novel would have remained a mere domestic drama with characters stuck in their own petty problems without the racial plot that roots it in the Southern context and highlights the shallowness of the aristocratic myth. The dramas of the cavaliers and their belles are played against the background of the submission of the black who become the victims of white selfishness. In the attempt to escape the responsibility of having killed a little girl, Stanley, supported by her family, chooses to throw the blame on young Parry Clay, the son of a family that had been, for generations, in the service of the Timberlakes and Fitzroys. Belonging to a white, upper-class family, Glasgow was part of "a generation that was taught to duck the problem in its cradle. But all this does not mean that she was unaware that it existed" (Auchincloss 15). Moreover, in her treatment of the racial issue in the novel, it is clear that her belonging to the upper class is precisely what makes her sensitive to the drama of a race for whose dire fate her class is totally responsible.

From the very beginning, Parry seems to be a sort of tragic hero in his hubristic desire to overstep the condition forced on him by his race and by his belonging to the Southern community, attracting, as it seems, the wrath of the Southern white gods who make sure that his dreams are forever crushed. His skin is very light, almost white, and he has a mixed Native and African heritage, symbol of the oppression the racial other had to bear in American history. Also, his light skin points to one of the darkest sins of the South: miscegenation, mark of the humiliation to which an entire race was submitted during years of slavery and segregation. The impoverished and marginal existence the black people still lead in the little Southern town at the end of the thirties, Glasgow argues, is caused by the white who must, eventually, assume responsibility.

The writer also points out the fact that the coexistence of the two races makes the degradation of the black even more tragic, as it is masked by apparent benevolence which turns into racism in moments of crisis. Both Charlotte and Craig, for instance, would like, at the beginning of the novel, to help Parry overstep his condition by continuing his studies somewhere in the North, but they are both eager to sacrifice him, when the fate of one of their own race is at stake. Asa and Roy alone are capable to cross the racial barrier and see Parry as a human being and not as a mere repository of white guilts and a victim at hand, to be used for their survival. Nevertheless, the long tradition of servitude has defined the relationship between the races to such a point that even Asa is confused in dealing with it:

The twilight thickened between them, and he felt that it was the dark thickness of race, that impenetrable obscurity, which was welling up among the intricate ties of human relationship. And through this thickness, which appeared alien and hostile, the boy's eyes, blind with seeking, stared back at him from a face that seemed to be without edges and without structure. All he really knew of Parry was a neat blue suit of clothes, outgrown, no doubt, by the son of one of Minerva's patrons, a well-laundered blue shirt, also a hand-me-down, he supposed, observing the carefully darned collar, a cheap red tie and black hair, without a kink, which might have belonged to a white man or an Indian. But beyond these external details, which were the only obvious facts, he felt the thick silence, not of mystery, but of a vast emptiness. (Glasgow 38)



The black man in the white people's minds is not unknown or inscrutable: he is absent. Parry's description is a miscellanea of elements (an almost unidentifiable face, white people's clothes, misleading straight hair), which do not make up the image of a real man. This is exactly what the black man has been in the white imagination: an artificial construct that has little to do with reality, a mere reflection in the white mind, without consistence. Ironically, the situation is totally different from the vantage point of the black servant. Thus, as Asa notices very early in the novel, "our servants know all about us, while we know nothing of them. They are bound up in our daily lives; they are present in every intimate crisis; they are aware of, or suspect, our secret motives" (Glasgow 34). Indeed, Minerva, Parry's mother and a sort of mammy figure of the novel, is the first to notice the relationship between Stanley and Peter, Roy's husband, and also the fact that Stanley drinks too much. These are details that are overlooked by the members of the family, but which will lead to the subsequent crises.

Though he appears to be special, at least to the others in the novel, Parry's drama is not singular. His desire to overcome his condition and become a lawyer instead of a worker or a porter does not necessarily mean he is the only ambitious one in a mass of contented "happy darkies," as the early plantation romances represented the slaves. He seems special to Asa and the others because their familiarity with other black people is limited, the two races being largely segregated at that time, in the South. The mention, however, of a certain "Uncle John" who had big dreams, like Parry, but who is now only a waiter in a restaurant, is one more of countless stories of ambition stifled by the injustice of the Southern society. It also suggests that there is discontent in the mass of the apparently tranquil black population, unhappy with their lives and unwilling to stand it forever.

Parry's dream, too, will become yet another story of defeat. Though saved by Asa, Parry does not recover from the experience of jail, his attitude, at the end, appearing to be "beyond rage, beyond resentfulness, beyond everything but bewilderment" (Glasgow 575), which makes Asa feel that he could not really save Parry:

While he looked at Parry, he had the feeling that he had wasted his effort against a force which was soft, elusive, and yet utterly impenetrable. A single lost illusion! A solitary error of justice in a world where justice is even rarer than mercy! How could an incident like that, barely twenty-four hours in jail, have completely knocked the spirit out of a boy who was so nearly white? (Glasgow 576-7)

Asa, with all his kindness, does, again, what the white people have done for generations, namely judging the black from their own perspective and failing to understand the real drama they go through. For Asa, this is a single lost illusion, and he urges Parry to go on, follow his dream and forget about this incident. For Parry, on the other hand, it is a Darwinian type of conditioning caused by the environment: as a black man, any lost illusion is the end, as he is taught, by the experience of his race, that there are no second chances. In fact, for him, the entire episode is a cruel reminder that he had no chance to change his life whatsoever.

The irony of the ending resides in the clash of perspectives of the white and the black. The white, including the kind-hearted Asa, believe that things are going to be all right, that Parry is saved, and human values are restored. From the other side of the racial line, things are different: Parry's life is forever destroyed. Moreover, a little girl is dead and a woman injured. Nobody, ever, seems to care about that, either.

As a conclusion, the novel *In This Our Life*, written at the end of Glasgow's career and life, is a representation of the Southern aristocracy on the verge of the Second World War. Starting in a world that seems to be moving towards modernity, the novel actually presents a society stuck in false traditions, injustice and intolerance, clinging to conventions, while praying to the god of materialism. It is a story of cavaliers, belles and black victims showing the worst of the aristocratic South, but also presenting the buds of salvation in Asa's defiance of his family, and Roy's rejection of compromise and patriarchy. On the other hand, though, the novel's ending is rather ambiguous: Asa holds the broken Roy in his arms and promises her that she will find happiness, but he does not seem to believe it himself. Life is a struggle, but happiness is not always the reward. What remains, at the end of the novel, is a trail of victims and broken destinies that have always marked the violent history of the South.

Although not ranked by the critics as her best work, *In This Our Life* is an insightful novel. The writer herself was doubtful about it, as she could complete only the second draft before publication, instead of the customary three readings, but she also confessed that it was very close to her heart (Bufkin 258). As such, it carries the aging writer's views and emotions about life, people and all things Southern.

#### Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Freed from Uncle William's grip, Asa and Roy will eventually find their peace and happiness under Kate's maternal protection in the novel's sequel *Beyond Defeat*.

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