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## A FRAGILE (DIS)POSITION – THE (AB)USES OF ‘FEMININE DISEASES’ IN SOUTHERN PATRIARCHAL IDEOLOGY.

So long as she is nervous, fickle, capricious, delicate, diffident and dependent, man will worship and adore her. Her weakness is her strength, and her true art is to cultivate and improve that weakness.

George Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*

As weak and inferior creatures Southern ladies constantly needed gentlemen's protection in the antebellum and postbellum period,<sup>1</sup> which in turn conveniently excused patriarchy's dominance and supremacy.<sup>2</sup> The cult of domesticity was tightly linked to women's inferiority.<sup>3</sup> Fragile demeanor and health was not a characteristic exclusive to Southern belles; it was prevalent practice for Victorian women to complain of poor health and excuse themselves from inconvenient duties or situations. There is a twofold explanation of the relationship between health and social restrictions. In *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* Carroll Smith-Rosenberg explains that many an illness in nineteenth-century America could be construed as an amplification of a Victorian feminine myth. In *Madwoman in the Attic* Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gunbar, however, turn the relationship around – women were repressed by the Victorian myth of the feminine,

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<sup>1</sup> The terms antebellum and postbellum refer respectively to the period before and after the U.S. Civil War. The antebellum times are often used interchangeably with the term the Old South, whereas the postbellum period consists of two eras in the history of American South: Reconstruction and the New South.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese suggests that female delicacy and frailty stressed the value of male strength. E. F O X - G E N O E S E, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South*, Chapel Hill and London: the University of North Carolina Press, 1988, p. 197.

<sup>3</sup> To read more about this relation, see B. J. H A R R I S, *Beyond Her Sphere: Women and the Professions in American History*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978, p. 32-72.

which consequently resulted in their illness.<sup>4</sup> The excessive devotion, submissiveness, and sacrifice could have physical and psychological impact on the weak, insecure and indoctrinated minds of Victorian ladies. In *Invalid Women*, the most comprehensive literary study on the subject, Diane Prince Herndl sees “patriarchal culture as potentially sickening for women and as defining women as inherently sick, especially when they resist its norms.”<sup>5</sup> However, I am inclined to believe that in order to fully understand the relation between health/illness and social norms, one should combine Smith’s paradigm with that of Gilbert and Gunbar’s – ladies’ frail health was both a consequence of and a form of resistance to debilitating patriarchal regulations of women’s lives.

On the surface a fragile, ill lady’s relation to power was nonexistent. Not only did she belong to a disadvantaged sex, but also she was not useful or productive in her household. Thus, she was deemed harmless by patriarchs.<sup>6</sup> However, what gentlemen successfully ignored is the fact that Southern ladies, among other Victorian women, frequently used this very element of the myth to revenge themselves on their oppressors. Inducing female feebleness, and eventual illness, Southern patriarchs wanted to create a demand for their chivalric protection and to usurp domination over their ladies. Some southern ladies turned this demand to their own advantage. Thus, it is quite difficult to disagree with Herndl’s claim that illness in the above mentioned social context can be seen “expressly as a form of power gained either through exploitation and manipulation or through sacrifice modeled on Christian values.”<sup>7</sup> It would be a blatant overstatement to say that all ill Victorian women were manipulative shrews, yet good ladies “who had been cruelly wronged and whose illness only revealed [their] piety”<sup>8</sup> were rather in the minority.

Ellen Glasgow’s oeuvre instantiates this relationship between female fragile disposition and patriarchal ideology. The illnesses of her heroines have been recognized and widely discussed by literary critics in relation to victimization; however, the virtual insolvability of the paradox of a lady’s life is barely mentioned: the myth promulgates the idea that being frail and ill is inherent in her nature while at the same time violating her very nature (motherhood and wifehood) would also result

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<sup>4</sup> Gilbert and Gubar argue that “nineteenth-century culture seems to have actually admonished women to *be* ill. In other words, the ‘female diseases’ from which Victorian women suffered were not always byproducts of their training in femininity; they were the goals of such training.” S. G i l b e r t, S. G u n b a r, *The Madwoman in the Attic. The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1979, p. 54.

<sup>5</sup> D. H e r n d l, *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840-1940*, Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1993, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> Diane Herndl points to the etymology of the word invalid, often applied to describe fragile ladies as powerless, which in itself was a cultural definition of a woman’s life, ambitions and desires – not-valid. H e r n d l, *Invalid Women*, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem, p. 50.

in an illness.<sup>9</sup> If Southern ladies enjoyed equal status in their marriages and families, it would not be necessary for them to work by subterfuge in order to gain attention by means of health, or the lack thereof.<sup>10</sup> Socially conditioned, therefore, a woman's "weakness is her strength, and her true art is to cultivate and improve that weakness."<sup>11</sup> Using their fragility as a strategy to be treated seriously proves their inferior status, as in order to be heard, women have to "speak with their illnesses." Agreeing to a subordinate relation to her husband, a lady can and does elicit emotional support and evoke compassion with her frailty in the society.<sup>12</sup> Therefore ladies' demands are not exorbitant – all they want is peace of mind and the fair treatment<sup>13</sup> they believe they deserve for all their sacrifices. Yet once these demands are carried to the extreme, ladies turn into oppressors – Miss Angela Wilde of *The Wheel of Life*, Angela Gay in *The Miller of Old Church*, Anna Jeannette Blackburn of *The Builders*, and Eva Birdsong of *The Sheltered Life*, as well as Lavinia Timberlake of *In This Our Life*. Thus, victims and victimizers trade places and are trapped in the vicious circle of victimization.<sup>14</sup> Gentlemen use the myth to subordinate ladies, who in turn, pretending to be inferior, use the very same myth to punish gentlemen. For all their twists and rightly deserved punishments, such maneuvers would seem almost entertaining if it was not for their deleterious consequences.

Through Miss Angela Wilde of *The Wheel of Life* Ellen Glasgow manages to portray ladies' weak health as both a result of onerous social conditions and a sign of her defiance of the oppressive power patriarchy wields over her. Miss Angela has "remained a willful prisoner" in an upstairs large square room in the

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<sup>9</sup> Diane Prince Herndl sees "patriarchal culture as potentially sickening for women and as defining women as inherently sick, especially when they resist its norms." (Herndl, *Invalid Women*, p. 7)

In a similar vein, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg opines that a woman living in the 19<sup>th</sup> century America was assured that any departure from the domestic ideal promulgated by the myth would undoubtedly lead to her own "cancer, insanity, and a wasting death." C. Smith-Rosenberg, "Hearing Women's Words: A Feminist Reconstruction of History," *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, New York: Knopf, 1985, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg demonstrates that "the hysterical woman can be seen as both product and indictment of her culture." C. Smith-Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America," *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America*, New York: Knopf, 1985, p. 215.

<sup>11</sup> G. Fitzhugh, *Sociology for the South, or the Failure of Free Society*, New York: Burt Franklin, 1859, p. 214.

<sup>12</sup> B. Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962, p. 21; B. Ekman, *The End of a Legend: Ellen Glasgow's History of Southern Women*, Stockholm: Uppsala, 1979, p. 92.

<sup>13</sup> See S. Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Bibliography*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1998, p. 122; M.K. Richards, *Ellen Glasgow's Development as a Novelist*, The Hague: Mouton, 1971, p. 120; Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> It has been suggested that a scathing portrayal of Victorian women victimizing men with their health might have been Ellen Glasgow's therapeutic strategy – being an invalid herself (loss of hearing, chronic headaches) she might have feared she would become one of these women if she yielded to her illnesses. (Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, p. 21)

left wing of her brother's house<sup>15</sup> after an incident in her youth which damaged her reputation:

Forty years ago Angela Wilde, as a girl of twenty, had in the accustomed family phrase "brought lasting disgrace upon them," and she had dwelt, as it were, in the shadow of the pillory ever since. Unmarried she had yielded herself to a lover, and afterward when the full scandal had burst upon her head, ... she had condemned herself to the life of a solitary prisoner within four walls.<sup>16</sup>

Since the incident, Miss Angela's ever-present headaches have affected the lives of her closest relatives – Percival, her brother, refrains from playing a flute as this activity would provoke his sister's discomfort. Percival decides not to sell their house and move uptown, closer to Central Park, because his spinster sister "can't even stand the mention of it," and what even makes matters worse he rationalizes Angela's irrational decision using her frail health: "in her affliction how could one expect it?"<sup>17</sup> Moreover, in order not to cause further emotional and physical distress, Angela's siblings, aware of her deep reproach and bitter scorn towards men,<sup>18</sup> do not invite male guests to their home.

The blow to her reputation which resulted in Miss Angela's psychological damage is reflected in her appearance and, more curiously, in her special status in the family. Since Miss Wilde looks "[c]old, white, and spectral as one of the long slim candles on an altar, still beautiful with an indignant and wounded loveliness"<sup>19</sup> her image evokes the romantic idea, so cherished by the Victorians, of a woman being wasted away by consumption. In *Illness as Metaphor* Susan Sontag notes that an appearance of consumption in women "became a staple of nineteenth century manners ... it was glamorous to look sickly."<sup>20</sup> In this sense, the spectral and fragile appearance allowed Angela to "become in the end at once the shame and the romance of her family"<sup>21</sup> – with her visible symptoms of moral and social "fall" the spinster has brought both glamour and disgrace into her family.

Angela's own brother, Percival, referring to her condition as an affliction proves that illness is socially acceptable, if not induced. Theoretically inferior, and in need of protection, Miss Angela claims dominance over the stronger family members: her brother/patriarch and her married sisters. Julius Rowan Raper matter-of-factly points out that "[i]n forty years [Miss Wilde] has succeeded in transforming her trauma into a workable hypochondria replete with headaches,

<sup>15</sup> E. Glasgow, *The Wheel of Life*, New York: Doubleday, 1906, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 23.

<sup>20</sup> S. Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, New York: Farrar, 1978, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> Glasgow, *The Wheel of Life*, p. 23.

allergies, and exacerbatable nerves. As an invalid, she manages to prey upon the compassion of her family and, thereby, to tyrannize them.”<sup>22</sup> The only person able to see through Angela’s mental affliction is Laura,<sup>23</sup> her niece. Thanks to her liberated spirit and fresh perspective Laura is able to point out that the whole family not only contributes but also intensifies the spinster’s affliction: “Don’t you see that by encouraging her as you did in her foolish attitude, you have given her past power over her for life and death. It is wrong – it is ignoble to bow down and worship anything – man, woman, child, or event, as she bows down and worships her trouble.”<sup>24</sup> More importantly, Laura<sup>25</sup> realizes they unconsciously surrender to aunt Angela’s manipulation and petticoat tyranny.<sup>26</sup>

Miss Angela Wilde sets the tone for her literary successors, who are more developed and thus “would more fully illustrate the casual connections between the moribund chivalric tradition ..., evasive idealism, the sheltered life, feminine invalidism, and commonplace feminine tyranny through the solicitation of sympathy.”<sup>27</sup> *The Miller of Old Church* depicts the wealthy Gay family living in the mansion reflecting their aristocratic grandeur, which is dominated by the presence of Angela Gay. Mrs. Gay’s hysterical behavior is her passive-aggressive response to gender and power relations; thus again proving her inferior status, the Southern lady can redefine her social position and actively rebel against prescribed gender roles.<sup>28</sup> Hysterical behavior was a socially accepted role for a woman which would palliate the gendered incompatibility but the price for this situation was “dependency,

<sup>22</sup> J.R. Raper, *Without Shelter: The Early Career of Ellen Glasgow*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1971, p. 224.

<sup>23</sup> Laura perceptively observes: “[t]here’s nothing in the world the matter with Aunt Angela.” Glasgow, *The Wheel of Life*, p. 22-3.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

<sup>25</sup> Kesiah plays a similar role in relation to a victimizer, Mrs. Gay, of *The Miller of Old Church*. David Blackburn and Mitty Timberlake also see through Angelica’s invalidism in *The Builders*.

<sup>26</sup> Julius Rowan Raper argues that confining herself to the life of a secluded invalid, aunt Angela “manages to prey upon the compassion of her family, and thereby, to tyrannize them.” Raper, *Without Shelter*, p. 224.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 224-5. Lavinia Timberlake is certainly one of “[t]he ‘Angelas’ of Miss Glasgow’s later novels” Julius Rowan Raper mentioned. *Ibidem*, p. 224. Mrs. Timberlake has “discovered that a physical malady may be turned, by a prudent and far-sighted woman, into a moral support.” E. Glasgow, *In This Our Life*, New York: Harcourt, 1941, p. 46. She chooses the position of a chronic invalid (Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, p. 97-8), she is “one of the grotesque invalids the sheltered life makes of women” (Raper, *Without Shelter*, p. 247). For more thorough analyses of Lavinia’s attacks of heart failure and matriarchal tyranny of tears and hypochondria, see Raper, *Sunken Garden*, p. 173; Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, p. 124-5; M. Thiébaux, *Ellen Glasgow*, New York: Fredrick Ungar Publishing Co., 1982, p. 164; and F.P.W. McDowell, *Ellen Glasgow and the Ironic Art of Fiction*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1960, p. 216-7.

<sup>28</sup> Carroll Smith-Rosenberg saw hysteria as a tactic offering all Victorian women a chance to restructure their place within the family (Smith-Rosenberg, “The Hysterical Woman,” p. 200).

fragility, emotionality, narcissism.”<sup>29</sup> Once women were dismissed as subservient and weaker, gentlemen did not bother to take them seriously and thus exposed themselves to shrewd manipulation.

From the very moment Angela Gay is introduced in the novel the careful reader can discern her tangible power over her family and acquaintances, when she has “dominated not by force, but by sentiment, that she [has] surrendered all rights in order to grasp more effectively at all privileges.”<sup>30</sup> Her soft and delicate looks become a weapon Mrs. Gay uses against her family members, especially against her brother, Jonathan. With her fragility and weakness, she evokes pity and compassion: “[w]hen Mrs. Gay first came to live with [Jonathan], she was so beautiful and so delicate, that she looked as if a wind would blow her away – so soft that she could smother a person like a mass of feathers. He felt after that that he had entangled himself, and it was only at the last when he was dying that he had any remorse.”<sup>31</sup> Her softness becomes a perfect tool of manipulation, despite the fact that, paradoxically, it suggests her vulnerability and harmlessness: Angela Gay has “smothered his [her brother’s] soul with her softness, and wound him about her little finger when she appeared all the time too weak to lift her hand.”<sup>32</sup>

Mrs. Gay’s heart condition and nervousness, so typical of hysterics, allowed her to express what Smith-Rosenberg identified in Victorian women as, “malaise, discontent, anger, and pain.”<sup>33</sup> If making scenes, which would appeal to the consciousness of the audience, does not suffice, Angela resorts to faking heart attacks and a nervous condition to spare herself the stark reality.<sup>34</sup> The fear of her potential bouts of hysteria, heart or nervous condition prevents her relatives and friends from telling her uncomfortable truths.<sup>35</sup> All efforts within the family to maintain pretenses are bound to end in misfortunes, as Angela Gay rules through imperceptible sentiment. The evasive idealism which was supposed to shield her from distress is based on one of her own first principles of diplomacy “an unpleasant fact [was to be] treated as non-existent, was deprived in a measure of its power for evil. By the application of this principle, she had extinguished her brother-in-law’s

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 207. Similarly to the hysteric, an invalid woman has “purchased her escape from the emotional and – frequently – from the sexual demands of her life only at the cost of pain, disability, and an intensification of woman’s traditional passivity and dependence.” (Ibidem, p. 207)

<sup>30</sup> E. Glasgow, *The Miller of Old Church*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1911, p. 72.

<sup>31</sup> Ibidem, p. 174.

<sup>32</sup> Ibidem, p. 175.

<sup>33</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, “The Hysterical Woman,” p. 198.

<sup>34</sup> See McDowell, *Ellen Glasgow*, p. 105.

<sup>35</sup> See Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, p. 95; F.P.W. McDowell, “The Prewar Novels,” *Ellen Glasgow: Centennial Essays*, Ed. Thomas Inge, Charlottesville, VA.: University Press of Virginia, 1976, p. 95.

passion for Janet Merryweather.”<sup>36</sup> Kesiah, Angela’s unmarried sister, explains the implications of this situation to her nephew Jonathan:

I believe your Uncle Jonathan would have married the girl’s mother – Janet Merryweather – but for your mother’s influence. . . . He broke it to her once –his intention, I mean – and for several days afterwards we quite despaired of her life. It was then that she made him promise – he was quite distracted with remorse for he adored Angela – that he would never allude to it again while she was alive. We thought then that it would be only for a short while, but she has outlived him ten years in spite of her heart disease. One can never rely on doctors, you know.<sup>37</sup>

Out of consideration for Angela’s health, her brother agrees to the life shaped by pretenses and illusions. Instead of being the cause of her death, Jonathan simply hopes to wait for it come sooner rather than latter. However, he miscalculates the odds – his sister’s health condition versus his chances of leading a peaceful life with a woman he loves after Angela’s death.

Goodman perceptively comments that the “efforts of Angela’s family to preserve her illusions end repeatedly in misfortune. While Angela represents the myopia of the Old South, she more specifically conjures the ghosts of invalid Glasgow women.”<sup>38</sup> Her son, Jonathan, fails to mention to his fragile mother that he has married Blossom (he reenacts his uncle’s deadly mistake). Unconsciously, protecting his mother from the truth (marrying Blossom he married below his station), Jonathan surrenders to the rules of her game and unwittingly falls into the trap. His comment, “What an angel you must be to have suffered so much and complained so little!”<sup>39</sup> suggests that by evoking inferiority and invalidism Angela has successfully put his vigilance to sleep and can now silently orchestrate his life. The final irony is that once Jonathan is shot dead by Abner Revercomb, his wife’s father, Angela does not have a heart attack upon learning of his tragic death. Barbro Ekman explains that her son’s murder “does not shatter her make-believe world.”<sup>40</sup>

Another feature characteristic of hysterical women is their suggestibility, narcissism, and their sudden and dramatic mood swings. Moreover, doctors, as Smith-Rosenberg observes, “complained that the hysterical woman was egocentric in the extreme, her involvement with others consistently superficial and tangential.”<sup>41</sup> Mrs. Gay is capable of sacrificing other people’s lives, ambitions, and dispositions merely to maintain her private mental comfort. To the family lawyer, Mr. Chamberlayne, Angela is “one of those particularly angelic characters from whose presence even

<sup>36</sup> Glasgow, *The Miller of Old Church*, p. 325.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 83-4.

<sup>38</sup> Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Bibliography*, p. 121-2.

<sup>39</sup> Glasgow, *The Miller of Old Church*, p. 75.

<sup>40</sup> Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, p. 95.

<sup>41</sup> Smith-Rosenberg, “The Hysterical Woman,” p. 202.

the thought of evil is banished. You have only to look into the face to discern how pure and spotless she has kept her soul” – at the expense of others, we should add.<sup>42</sup>

Anna Jeannette Blackburn of *The Builders*, through far from hysterical, equally well evokes angelic images. Her unsurpassable beauty<sup>43</sup> makes men and women refer to her Angelica. Analogously to Angela Gay, the parasitical Angelica uses others’ gullibility as her secret weapon. She keeps up the pretense of a helpless and fragile lady to create a peaceful, yet falsely secure, picture of her angelic vulnerability and harmlessness. Not only men, but also Caroline, the nurse hired to comfort Anna Jeannette, is under the spell of her beauty, perfection and feminine fragility. The nurse admits that: “more than her beauty, the sweetness of her look, the appeal of her delicacy, or her feminine weakness, went straight to the heart.”<sup>44</sup> This in turn makes men regard her as an unworthy and unequal opponent in victimization. Not being cut out for work, Angelica marries David Blackburn (Mrs. Colfax bluntly refers to this fact saying that Angelica “sold herself”<sup>45</sup>), a naïve man, whom she can accuse of unfaithfulness (accuses David of an affair with Caroline) and maltreatment (David allegedly forces Anna Jeannette to do charity work for war victims). Hence, having achieved a martyred position in Virginian society, she gains control over it by evoking feelings of pity and sympathy. Before, Angelica is forced to truly depend on her family’s care and pity, she uses her perfect beauty and vulnerable disposition to destroy her sister’s would-be marriage and disentangle herself from David’s life by eloping with Alan Wythe, her sister’s fiancé who has inherited huge fortune from his uncle. Her come-back home, after Alan’s death in a battlefield, is an ironic twist. Now, she is really ill, a serious operation has left her with “no hope of any permanent cure”<sup>46</sup> and the only thing she can expect is to “linger on, as an invalid, for a good many years.”<sup>47</sup> Her fragile health and ephemeral beauty on the surface suggest self-sacrificing behavior characteristic of womanly women, however, only a few can see it as a representation of her manipulateness and cruelty.

Compared with Angela Gay or Angelica Blackburn, Eva Birdsong of *The Sheltered Life* does not seem all that harmful in her inferiority. Mrs. Birdsong is the embodiment of the myth of the Southern lady and tries to live up to the ideals of the past age. She is “the reigning beauty of Queenborough in an age when only authentic loveliness could hope to be crowned. ... The Victorian age, even

<sup>42</sup> Glasgow, *The Miller of Old Church*, p. 102.

<sup>43</sup> Angelica Blackburn looks “as if her head and shoulders had been chiseled in marble” and “the *Washington Examiner* spoke of her as the most beautiful woman in Virginia” (E. Glasgow, *The Builders*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1919, p. 38, 181).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 39.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 32.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 363.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 363. For closer analyses of Angelica, see McDowell, *Ellen Glasgow*, p. 134; Richards, *Ellen Glasgow’s Development*, p. 145.

in its decline, worshipped beauty and she was as near perfection in her girlhood as if she had stepped out of some glimmering antique horizon.<sup>48</sup> She has sacrificed her potential singing career to elope with George, and she “demands love in return.”<sup>49</sup> Subconsciously aware that George cannot provide her with this, Eva satisfies herself with evasive idealism. As her whole world is make-believe, the myth demands from Eva artificial smiles and gracious ignorance of her husband’s unfaithfulness. However, during a waltzing party Eva decides to make use of her inferior position to call George to order. Having waltzed with Eva as in old times, George leaves his wife in a ball room for a flirtatious moment with Delia Barron, one of the youngest beauties in their town. Even though she is reprimanded by her friend not to “have” a nervous breakdown – “Hush Eva. It is much wiser to pretend that you didn’t [see them]. Even if you know, it is safer not to suspect anything”<sup>50</sup> – Eva crosses “the floor and [flings] herself down on a couch by the bed, while throbs of anguish [shudder] through her in a convulsion. .... With a choking cry, Mrs. Birdsong start[s] up from the couch. Then flinging herself down again, she sob[s] out hysterically.”<sup>51</sup> Using the image of a weak and fragile woman is the only weapon Eva can use to get George back. On seeing Eva’s grief, her friend with a tragic, yet triumphant expression tells George: “It was a sudden faintness. ... I am always uneasy about her heart when she has these attacks.”<sup>52</sup> Not surprisingly Eva’s condition disappears in the security of her home, with George under control.

Unlike Mrs. Angela Gay’s, Eva Birdsong’s illness is not altogether imaginary – in the course of her life, Eva has to undergo an operation that would deprive her feminine body of its beauty. Even though her illness is never identified, I am inclined to believe that is it either caused by venereal diseases she might have contracted from her promiscuous husband or cancer spreading throughout her body.<sup>53</sup> The mysterious illness takes all she has, and what is worse, it stresses the inevitability of the passage of time, which would anyway take her beauty away from her. The disease is left unnamed possibly because, as Elaine Showalter observes, venereal disease was regarded “as one of the terrible secrets of marriage which women were never told.”<sup>54</sup> Evasive idealism prevents Southern ladies from learning about

<sup>48</sup> E. Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*, New York: Doubleday, 1932. London: Virago Press, 1981, p. 15.

<sup>49</sup> Ekman, *The End of a Legend*, p. 96.

<sup>50</sup> Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*, p. 87.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 86-7.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 90.

<sup>53</sup> Susan Goodman asserts that Eva’s disease “seems to be nowhere and everywhere – in breast and womb and mind – as ubiquitous as the air she breathes or the myth she lives.” Goodman, *Ellen Glasgow: A Biography*, p. 190.

<sup>54</sup> E. Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, London: Virago, 1992, p. 196.

their husband's possible and socially, even if covertly, accepted double standard of sexuality. The price for this double standard was a venereal disease.

However, also social and cultural implications of cancer would neatly explain Eva Birdsong's (dis)position. According to Susan Sontag far "from revealing anything spiritual, [cancer] reveals that the body is, all too woefully, just the body."<sup>55</sup> Thus, her illness emphasizes the fact that Eva is just an embodiment of male carnal wishes and desires; she has nothing spiritual or intellectual to offer, yet again stressing her inferiority. The choice of illness is also interesting because according to "the mythology of cancer, it is generally a steady repression of feeling that causes the disease."<sup>56</sup> Eva's life is everything but indulgence and truthfulness, there is nothing natural in her behavior. John Welch, her doctor, realizes this situation before Eva's operation: "[a]ll the conditions of her life are unnatural. I honestly believe ... that she has never drawn a natural breath since she was married. If she dies ... it will be the long pretense of her life that has killed her."<sup>57</sup> "Passion [moving] inward, striking and blighting the deepest cellular recesses"<sup>58</sup> proves beyond doubt that Eva's unnatural life is full of repressed emotions (repressed emotions bring shame to cancer patients<sup>59</sup>), it is like the long strain which reveals itself as the look of defeat on her face.<sup>60</sup> If we accept Sontag's claim that many people believed that undischarged rage is carcinogenic,<sup>61</sup> then Eva's reaction to seeing George kiss Jenny is the outburst of cancer.

Eva Birdsong's postoperative nervous breakdown (attacks of wild panic, amnesiac wandering on the streets, hysterical laughter) and prolonged convalescence might have multifarious causes. On the one hand, the operation marks the end of Eva's both beauty and womanhood at the age of forty-two, thus, naturally her illness has a tremendous impact on her feeling of self-worth. Therefore, in the social context of patriarchal society, her neurasthenia<sup>62</sup> is not an unjustified response to the ailment and operation. On the other hand, I am inclined to accept Julius Rowan Raper's argument that Mrs. Birdsong's prolonged convalescence after the operation, "for which the doctors can find no cause,"<sup>63</sup> could be perceived as a similar maneuver to that on the dancing floor. However, apart from causing George's pity

<sup>55</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 18.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 22. Susan Sontag also observes that "[w]ith the modern diseases (once TB, now cancer), the romantic idea that the disease expresses the character is invariably extended to assert that the character causes the disease – because it has not expressed itself." Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 46.

<sup>57</sup> Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*, p. 153.

<sup>58</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 46.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 48.

<sup>60</sup> Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*, p. 222.

<sup>61</sup> Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 22.

<sup>62</sup> For more information on the etiology of neurasthenia, see Herndl, *Invalid Women*, p. 117.

<sup>63</sup> J.R. Raper, *From the Sunken Garden: The Fiction of Ellen Glasgow, 1916 – 1945*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980, p. 144.

and attention, she also convalesces after a period of artificiality in her marriage. In a very frank conversation with Jenny, her young friend who shows less-than-appropriate excessive, but naïve, affection to George, Eva admits: “[w]hen you’ve never been yourself for forty years, you’ve forgotten what you are really. .... I’m worn out with being somebody else – with being somebody’s ideal ... I want to turn around and be myself for a little while before it is too late.”<sup>64</sup> Here, again the symptoms of neurasthenia (such as anxiety, fainting, nervousness), which might correspond to present-day chronic fatigue syndrome, would explain Eva’s artificial life full of pretenses.

In Southern states during Victorianism and still at the beginning of the twentieth century female (dis)position was the outcome of patriarchal oppression, but also it was a way of protesting against it. Feigning or exaggerating weakness, frailty and feminine diseases became a form of retribution as they offered women a possibility to resist ideology which crippled their existence. However, some ladies carried their fragile (dis)position to an extreme, in so doing they trade places with the oppressors. Although in Ellen Glasgow’s fiction a significant percentage of aristocratic women develop heart problems and/or nervous conditions to exert an invalid power on naïve relatives, there are women who are not cruel or selfish and do not tyrannize with their invalidism. Far from embracing neurasthenia or any chronic illness, these women begin to reject the cultural construct of a woman as inferior because of weakness and lack of health. The crippled Sally Mickleborough of *The Romance of a Plain Man*, does not use her paralyzed spine as a pretext to get back at her husband Benjy. She simply waits for equality and love to dawn on him.<sup>65</sup> With the advent of feminism and gradual medical advances, weak and ill ladies stop being associated with feminine beauty, inferiority, and the influence of invalidism on gentlemen slowly wears off. Liberated women begin to use their intellect, strong will and education rather than their prescribed ‘fragile’ disposition to fight with their social disfranchisement.

Key words: Literature of the American South, Ellen Glasgow’s oeuvre, Victorian women, patriarchal ideology, the myth of a Southern lady, fragile women, women’s diseases.

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<sup>64</sup> Glasgow, *The Sheltered Life*, p. 285.

<sup>65</sup> E. Glasgow, *The Romance of a Plain Man*, New York: Macmillan, 1909. Blair Rouse lists women who refused to give in to illness, but they are all of non-aristocratic origin: Marthy Burr of *The Voice of the People* (New York: Doubleday, 1900), Mrs. Oakley of *Barren Ground* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1925), and Mary Evelyn of *Vein of Iron* (New York: Harcourt, 1935), Ben Starr’s mother of *The Romance of a Plain Man* (Rouse, *Ellen Glasgow*, p. 21).