

CONTRASTING VISIONS: THE PAST AND THE FUTURE IN *THE SHELTERED LIFE*, A NOVEL BY ELLEN GLASGOW

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In The Sheltered Life, where I knew intuitively that the angle of vision must create the form, I employed two points-of-view alone, though they were separated by the whole range of experience. Age and youth look on the same scene, the same persons, the same events and occasions, the same tragedy in the end. Between these conflicting points-of-view the story flows on, as a stream flows in a narrow valley. Nothing happens that is not seen, on one side, through the steady gaze of the old man, seeing life as it is, and, on the other side, by the troubled eyes of the young girl, seeing life as she would wish it to be. Purposedly, I have tried here to interpret reality through the dissimilar mediums of thought and emotion. I have been careful to allow no other aspects to impinge on the contrasting visions which create between them the organic whole of the book.¹

Jenny Blair Archbald's sureness of being able to conquer experience is significantly separated from her grandfather's uncertainty as to his ability to understand the meaning under the complex surface of reality by more than one generation. Ellen Glasgow's metaphorical description of the young girl's selfish innocence and General Archbald's compassionate experience as running closely parallel but never touching is, thus, certainly appropriate, though rather simplistic. The Sheltered Life, reputedly one of her best novels, displays an ingeniously woven pattern of parallels which renders itself available to innumerable possibilities of pairing of characters throughout the story. This intricate net of comparisons enriches the plot and highlights the "conflicting views" which frame the reality presented to the readers.

The novel is set in Quicensborough, a thinly disguised Richmond, beginning in 1906 and developing to a time eight years later, through the autumn of 1914, just after the outbreak of the World War. It focuses on two aristocratic families of the Old South delicately balanced between their memories of the splendid balls of the 1890's and a twentieth-century city which threatens to become modern. Industrialism "stinks" and progress is killing the venerable old elms of Washington Street. In such a setting the author surprises an adulterous middle-aged male and a sexually-aware young girl of the modern generation playing a dangerous game. Miss Glasgow unmistakably equates the decline in morality with the disappearance of southern aristocratic families brought about by the deterioration of the city, of the South, of the world with the war.

We are first introduced to Jenny Blair in the novel. Her eyes wander from Louisa May Alcott's Little Women to the world outside her window. Miss Glasgow's characteristic irony presents the little girl as an antithesis to the female protagonists she is supposed to emulate: "Well, even if Mamma did form her character on Meg and Jo, I think they're just poky old things... Mamma may call the Marches lots of fun,... but I'm different. I'm different."² In her "nine years, seven months and three weeks" of age at the beginning of the novel, Jenny Blair shows a rebellious anxiety to see for herself the reality that lies beyond Washington Street and its vanishing aristocracy.

She roller skates down Canal Street for an investigation of its poverty and the origin of the stench that floats up to her home. Her adventure results in a bruised knee and an encounter with what the accepted double-standard George Birdsong stands for. When Jenny Blair promises to share in the secrecy of his visits to his mulatto mistress, she is agreeing to carry on the very kind of life from which she believes will be able to liberate herself. Despite her protestations of independence and her pseudo-rebellious nature, the little girl's future is being shaped by the romantic images of an idealized life conveyed to her by her mother's hypocrisy and her grandfather's nostalgia.

Cora Archbald does her best to protect her child from the truth "when it hurts"; she is being brought up to become what Louis Auchincloss calls "a debutante of the ante-bellum era."³ Mrs. Archbald bears the mark of the author's strongest disapproval. Her description as somebody capable of enduring "any discomfort in body so long as one was not obliged to be independent in act," "is far from flattering (p.18). She is said to be kind at times, but bound by tradition. At first she is described with tolerant irony, as when looking for a suitable family tree for her sister-in-law's husband who is a carpenter. In order to better understand the depth of her sarcasm against the widow, however, one has to have read Miss Glasgow's autobiography, The Woman Within, where she reveals a touching sensibility, not unlike that of the General. In a lifetime of physical weakness and injured sensibilities, she had a strong attachment to suffering human beings and defenseless animals, and her dogs were among her closest friends. William, the General's dog, refuses Mrs. Archbald's invitation to sit on her rug in his owner's absence because "she did not count as a companion." Her comment on the animal's preference for the cool bathroom tiles reads: "...dogs are queer creatures...which was only another proof that she was incapable to understand any species except her own." To this Glasgow adds that "her heart was generous, but her mind a drought, and she lacked the vein of mysticism that enabled the General and William to establish a communion superior to speech" (p.98). Later on the General remembers with some resentment that the widow had interfered with his decision to remarry and expresses his opinion of his daughter-in-

law: "An admirable woman..., admirable and unscrupulous. Even the sanguine brightness of her smile, which seemed to him as transparent as glass, was the mirror...of persevering hypocrisy. A living triumph of self-discipline, of inward poise, of the confirmed habit of not wanting to be herself, she had found her reward in that quiet command over circumstances" (p.243).

Mrs. Archbald unfaltering smile and cool command of the General's household has a counterpart in another woman she obviously admires. In her thirties, with "eyes like flying bluebirds"; Eva Birdsong's beauty is given an abstract value; she deserves to be worshipped and recounted in stories. She is known to have stopped processions and even a funeral. She is followed everywhere by admiring eyes, strolling down the street or waltzing with George. Yet, she is described as "one of those celebrated beauties who if they exist have ceased to be celebrated" (p.19). Mrs. Birdsong's perpetual smile and heroic appearance of happiness are aimed at disguising her poverty and her husband's unfaithfulness. The reader is soon informed that her "serene elegance" is specially admired because it is well known to be mere appearance. Cora Archbald approvingly points out that "even if she knew everything, she would never betray herself. When happiness failed her, she would begin to live on pride, which wears better. Keeping up an appearance is more than a habit with Eva. It is a second nature" (p.25). In fact, Mrs. Birdsong is blindly committed to the illusion of woman's suitable role; she has become the perfect wife and exclusively the perfect wife. There is a clear reflection of her hypocritical behavior in the contrast between the pleasant table she sets for dinner with the silver she has not yet sold and hot-house orchids, and the sad neglect of the garden around the house.

Eva's privations are described with delicate sympathy. She tells the General the only thing she could not have born would have been to find out that George did not love her. The irony is that the moral tradition formed by men like the General is responsible for Eva's idealization of marriage, while it is her passion for George and her continued loyalty to him that excuses his limitations and his inadequacy to sustain a perfect marriage. Though completely presented from the outside, Eva becomes the

pervasive spiritual center of the novel. She represents for the General all his era had idealized in women: legendary glamour, courage, mystery. Frederick McDowell says of her: "As a queenly woman of rare beauty and charm, she had become the crown of a hierarchical society. In that her love represents a lost cause and her gallant nature is defeated more through the circumstances than through spiritual weakness, she may symbolize the Old South caught in its unequal struggle during the Civil War."⁴ Eva's pride comes to mean more than love or even life; it becomes the main sustenance of the families in their resistance against modern industrialization with its disruption of values they have lived by. After her hysterectomy Eva's beauty and integrity as a passionate wife are compromised and experiences a pathologic terror in losing something that is already irrecoverably lost.

There is an interesting parallel drawn between Eva Birdsong and Jenny Blair Archbald. They both focus the love and admiration of Cora, the General and George. They are two beauties of different magnitudes: Eva the legendary beauty, Jenny Blair "pretty enough" for the lowered standards of modern life. Her mother, her grandfather and several other people in the novel indicate Eva as a role model to the young girl. In her enrapture with Mrs. Birdsong and not so regally splendid as the older woman, Jenny Blair takes a short route to displacing her. She clothes Eva in her nightgown and robe, merging her identity with Eva's without having to bear the burden of becoming an allegory. The young girl's naive and irresponsible nature feeds on the passion Eva and George seem to share, with poverty and infidelity stressing the romantic notion of the ideal marriage. In her eagerness to imitate Eva Birdsong, Jenny Blair develops an infatuation for George and throws herself in his arms in a search for the same sexual homage he accords his wife.

It is no wonder the adolescent girl falls prey to George's charms. He is made not only believable, but also likeable by Eva's own first infatuation with him. She fell in love with him after having watched him run into a house in flames in order to save a negro child, Memoria, later to become his mistress. He possesses a generous heart, too, for the General cannot forget he had once offered to help him out some financial trouble with a small

inheritance he had just received. George Birdsong does try to live up to Eva's standards. During her illness he refuses to smoke or drink whiskey until she is out of danger. And although he sees in Jenny Blair a possibility of recovering Eva's lost beauty, innocence and womanhood, he tries to resist her. "Whether you know it or not", he tells her, "innocence when it leaves to be eighteen is wicked" (p. 354). But Jenny Blair ignores his comment and ironically subscribes to Eva's illusions about the man with the result that the two women end up as antagonists when Eva's shattered dignity explodes with murderous force.

Eva Birdsong and Jenny Blair Archbald play out the conflict between what Ellen Glasgow calls "civilization" and the physical satisfaction which the twentieth century promises. The bitter irony in the novel is that this selfish modern young lady can yield to her biological demands but still take refuge in civilization without having to confront the consequences of her actions. The author's sympathies lie obviously with the older woman, for she shows the girl who refuses to be a debutante as superficial and dangerous. Yet, Glasgow laments Eva's sacrifice and thus martyrs her. Eva has been assisted by the Birdsongs in her effort to maintain appearances, to live up to the ideal of the perfect wife. She expects too much of life, they expect too much of her. Her inability to carry on her farce is a test of their values and traditions. In fact, the Archbalds' and Birdsongs' impossible ambition of carrying on a pathetic struggle against change are so devastating that not even murder can penetrate them and alter them.

Jenny Blair and the General can be said to represent the results of the same falsely-centered pattern, for the young girl is caught in the same "sheltered life" which has enslaved her grandfather all his life. The section about Jenny Blair's childhood, entitled "The Age of Make-Believe," and the General's retrospective are very neatly paralleled. Both are filled with their central figure's belief in proper behavior and concern for convention. Both chapters stress women's submission, acceptance of suffering, and tolerance of philandering as unavoidable parts of life. The General admires Eva, excuses George because he is generous, sanctioning the 'status quo' and seriously misdirecting his granddaughter.

The General's behavior is always extremely conventional. He married a woman he did not love because they had been accidentally stranded in a buggy all night. Only once in his life had he loved a woman with passion and he had lost her without ever having really possessed her. After thirty years of faithful marriage his wife died and for a while he had made plans to remarry and make at least the final years of his life happy. Instead, he gets caught in the gentlemanly tradition of his time and remains as the head of the household for his hypochondriac unmarried daughter and his son's widow and child. Ellen Glasgow's fine irony has another great moment in the General's recollections of his abnegation: "For eighty-three years he had lived two lives, and between these two different lives, which corresponded only in time, he could trace no connection: what he had wanted he had never had, what he had wished to do he had never done.. (p.152). And further on: "He had been a good citizen a successful lawyer, a faithful husband, an indulgent father; he had been indeed everything but himself. Always, he had fallen into the right pattern; but the centre of the pattern was missing" (p.164).

In one of her letters, Ellen Glasgow once said that the General's long reverie in the central section of the novel was "the whole book in a crystal."⁵ And in another letter she added that "in General Archbald, the real protagonist, I was dealing with the fate of the civilized mind in a world where even the civilizations we make are uncivilized."⁶ The old man is indeed shown as misfit, a man "born out of his time" who doesn't quite accept the conventional beliefs of his society. The central part of the book and its finest piece of prose, "The Deep Past," pictures a nauseated young boy being "blooded" by his grandfather on a fox hunt. The sensibility of the boy's poetic nature, his sympathy for the run-away slave, the vivid memory he keeps of the look of the horror in the eyes of a buck pursued by his grandfather's hounds are very close to the self-portrayed sensibility one finds in The Woman Within, as mentioned before. The old man possesses a somewhat heroic virtue in loyalty to his obligations. He had wanted to be a poet in a time and place where poetry was only tolerated in never perused leather bound volumes written by foreign authors. He was a humanitarian in a society that cultivated slavery, cock fighting and fox hunting.

A sheltering gentleman in a society where women pretended to obey but in reality dominated. He was himself an unsheltered civilized man in a hostile culture that thought of itself as civilization.

But although the General seems to be the wisest character in the story and one with the deepest knowledge of world and what is wrong in it, he also seems to embody a recalcitrant, romantic age very much enfeebled. In his reflections, he concludes that "though the present was an improvement...the young were more insolent and the old more exacting. Wildness there had always been, and would be always, he supposed, only the vague wildness of Jenny Blair lacked, he felt, both dignity and direction" (pp. 174-75). Even when Eva Birdsong is in the hospital, middle-aged and sick, "it seemed to him that the lost radiance of youth shone in her face... But his eyes were old eyes, not to be trusted. They still looked at life through the irridescent film of a more romantic age" (pp. 185-86).

Ellen Glasgow published this novel when she was approaching sixty years of age. Her mother and many of her sisters had died rather young and her own consciousness of her frail health may have launched her a period of more open remarks about life and society, as well as her own role in modern America. It is fairly safe to say that General Archbald voices many of her feelings about life at a time when the former rebellious youth had turned into a nostalgic middle-aged woman. To the General, "even the sounds of the present, and certainly the smells, were less romantic than they used to be" (p. 179), for he does not approve of noisy automobiles and the smelly factories. Too much civilization and refinement have tied the old man up to his life of pretense and thus rendered him powerless to change his present or save his grand-daughter from tragedy. He continues to pay strict allegiance to the kind of innocence that he and his society have lost merely in the passage of time. His sense of this loss sets him apart from the other characters in The Sheltered Life, but it leaves him with a sense of futility. His very adoration of Mrs. Birdsong is one of the causes which has contributed to the enlargement of the gulf between her self-image and her husband's self-image. The General's determination to "keep all knowledge of Jenny Blair's life leads to the final pathetic scene of self-deception when Eva has shot George and the General embraces his grand-daughter and tells John

Welch not to be brutal with her, "remember how young she is and how innocent" (p.395).

Once again, the old General and his young grandchild are engulfed by the same denial to accept reality, by the choice of preserving the double-measurement in a society which is rapidly extinguishing itself in the very attempt of self-preservation through dissimulation, reflected in Jenny Blair's hysterical repetition that she "didn't mean anything at all" (p.394).

The parallel between Jenny Blair and her grandfather, despite their age difference, is reinforced by the young girl's dislike of John Welch, of his socialist philosophy, of his cynicism, and above all, her dislike of the direct language with which he attempts to correct her "sparrow vision" of the world. He is the young modern man she ought to have fallen in love with had she been able to escape the protective shelter of the Archbalds. John Welch is a realist; his vision of the world is accurate, scientific, unlovely and unhopeful. He is the only character capable of showing "moral indignation" against social injustice in the South and bold enough to criticize the Industrial Revolution openly. But Miss Glasgow manages to avoid this particular "contrasting vision" from interfering with her plot and the young physician compromises his honesty out of love and pity for Eva when he declares, at the end, that George's death had been an accident.

His loyalty to Eva makes him a counterpart of the General; his ideals seem to give the old man some hope. The General sees in the young American innocent some of his old rebellious nature and believes John Welch will be able to achieve self-satisfaction and live without pretense. The old man sincerely admires the young doctor's strong character and open nature. But what really brings them together is the boy's affection for Eva, his kindness to her. This suggestion of a possible parallel between the two men, young and old, does not hold to the end, though. The civilized man is utterly shocked by the direct language of the modern scientist: "she has a fifty-fifty chance, I should say. Her heart isn't as strong as it ought to be, but her kidneys are sound," says Welch. "The General stared back mutely, while he moisted his lips which felt suddenly blistered. It was distressing to hear Mrs. Birdsong's vital organs spoken of as plainly as if they were

blocks of wood. Young people were more direct than they used to be, and he knew that John, after his habit of all realists in every age, disliked sentimentality. Well, perhaps he was right, there was no doubt that he loved Mrs. Birdsong devotedly, though he was able to stand by and watch a surgeon cut into her body". (p.206).

The analogy between the Archbalds and the Birdsongs is ever present in the story. They are the only remaining aristocratic families in Washington Street, struggling to survive just as George and the General struggle to preserve the old elms against progress and pollution. The two families try to ignore the stench, or try to live with it. They are equally represented by the parallel between the General and Eva, the two civilized creatures. In the final scene both families recover some of their moral strength : they are going to stand by each other to outface criticism and scandal by pretending the murder was an accident.

Minor analogies are present in the contrasting figures of the General's two daughters. Etta represents the kind of woman the Old South made outcast of, those who lacked beauty and charm, are enraging antecedent for Glasgow, although it was not her personal case. Etta represents aristocratic debility and decay, and as such, in her hysterical hypochondria, she confronts the General every day with the defeated side of his own nature. Isabella is Etta's antithesis, though both women live only in the emotions, a parallel with Jenny Blair. Isabella is the passionate and rebellious trait of character that runs in the family. In her elopment with a carpenter she showed decisiveness enough to be unconventional, unlike her father. She embodies the fulfilment of the rebellious instincts the General has suppressed all his life and which are not fulfilled in Jenny Blair, either, because she is too sheltered. The General constantly sighs with hope for Isabella and regret for Etta.

The complex pattern of conflicts and parallels is further entangled by a series of shifts of focus around different characters as the story develops . Jenny Blair is surrounded by the stoic examples of her mother, her grandfather and Eva. The three of them see in her innocent youth the hope of recovering their lost illusions. George Birdsong is drawn into this circle attracted by her teasing, naive prettiness; while John Welch is the element

who tries to rescue her from the empty-middled circle.

Eva Birdsong can easily exchange places with the young girl and be placed at the centre of attention as the heroic beauty the General, Cora and Jenny Blair admire. George and John Welch love her, each of them in a different way, although they both know her better, knowing what is behind the façade of perfection.

The old General is constantly surrounded by the women in the novel. They are all attracted to his respectful, gentle manners, his weakness, his experience. George and John Welch admire his understanding of world, his dignity and value his friendship.

Even George centers attention. He awakens the passions of his wife, of Jenny Blair, Memoria, Miss Delia Baron, and who knows who else. He also attracts the unquestionable friendship of the General.

Blending the various circles and parallel threads that run through the story and weaving them together with uncommon artistry, Ellen Glasgow is able to come out with a sharp-edged "figure in the carpet". The skillful use of various tones adds special coloring to her picture. The first section is drawn with fine irony and light humor. The middle section is serious, poetic, reflexive and melancholy. The last and longest, "The Illusion", contains the tragic melodrama of deception where myths are destroyed, hypocrisy revealed but preserved.

The novel ends in a note of despair where society has been disrobed and exposed, but there seems to be no answers or solutions to its predicament. John Welch has changed his mind about joining the war in Europe because he has realized it is impossible to change oneself with a mere change in scenery: "I'd like to go away and be free, and I know perfectly well the kind of freedom I am looking for has not yet been invented. After all, Queensborough is only a small patch in the world. It is the same everywhere" (p. 295). The General is the only one who insists on seeing a very feeble light at the end of the tunnel: "My generation felt about social injustice, ... John's generation talks about social injustice; and perhaps, who knows, the next generation, or the generation after the next may begin to act about social injustice" (p. 270).

NOTES

¹ Ellen Glasgow, A Certain Measure (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1938), pp. 200-201.

² _____, The Sheltered Life (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1932), p. 3. All other references to the novel will appear in parentheses in the text.

³ Ellen Glasgow (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1964), p.32.

⁴ Ellen Glasgow and the Ironic Art of Fiction (Madison: The Univeristy of Wisconsin Press, 1960), p. 187.

⁵ Blair Rouse, ed. Leters of Ellen Glasgow (New York: Harcourt and Brace, Co., 1958), p. 122.

⁶ Ibid., p. 124.