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Fruitful Futility: Land, Body, and Fate in Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*

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FRUITFUL FUTILITY:
LAND, BODY, AND FATE IN ELLEN GLASGOW’S BARREN GROUND

by
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FRUITFUL FUTILITY:
LAND, BODY, AND FATE IN ELLEN GLASGOW’S BARREN GROUND

Katelin Ruth Moquin

Through a Cultural Studies lens and with Formalist-inspired analysis, this thesis paper addresses the complexly interwoven elements of land, body, and fate in Ellen Glasgow’s Barren Ground. The introductory chapter is a survey of the critical attention, and lack thereof, Glasgow has received from various literary frameworks. Chapter II summarizes the historical foundations of the South into which Glasgow’s fictionalized South is rooted. Chapter III explains the connections between land and body, especially through Dorinda’s victimization. The concluding chapter ties together the preceding arguments into a more universal argument regarding Dorinda’s debatable victory as it relates to the novel’s use of fate.

________________________________________________________________________________

Month    Year

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________________________________________________________________________________

Tommie L. Jackson  Chairperson
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To Clay, as I type this thought, I see your tiny, sweet handprint on the bottom right corner of my laptop screen. There is no greater motivation, little one.

To my daughter, yet unborn at the time of this project’s completion, who tangibly and intangibly reminds me that barrenness is more than something physical.
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Ellen Glasgow is gradually disappearing from the canon of Modern American Literature. A definitive dearth in critical attention toward Glasgow’s work becomes apparent in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Few contemporary critics are attending to Glasgow, but on the shelves of one Midwest University’s library basement, over one dozen hardcover books are dedicated to Glasgow alone. Several other titles discuss Glasgow in relation to her contemporaries, and still another abundance of criticism undertakes Glasgow’s world, the literature of the Modern South, i.e., the Southern Renaissance. Academic databases store numerous articles on Glasgow, especially from *Mississippi Quarterly* and *The Southern Literary Journal*. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Library of Virginia cannot seem to publish enough about Glasgow. But then, circa 1980, the criticism on Glasgow became barren.

A survey of publication dates for criticism on Glasgow indicates that perhaps the majority of English criticism, excepting the scholarship which comes from The University of North Carolina, the Library of Virginia, and a few other isolated journal titles, has published enough about Glasgow. Most of the publications on Glasgow belong to the second half of the twentieth century. So where are the twenty-first century publications on Glasgow? For example, albeit a small sample, the date of the last

Unsurprisingly, it centers on a question similar to the one at hand – where is the current criticism on Glasgow?

Preliminary research on Glasgow’s critics reveals many probable explanations. For example, many of the twentieth century critics that Glasgow attracted subscribed to Freudian and historical-biographical theoretical frameworks. As the popularity of those frameworks has faded, so has the literary light which once shone on Glasgow. One such critic is Julius Rowan Raper who generated much of the criticism on Glasgow published circa 1980. Raper’s interpretations rely heavily on a mixture of Freudian and biographical theories. In current literary spheres, these theoretical frameworks are perceived as approaches that lead to eventual ends; i.e., there are boundaries to an author’s biography and a particular psychological framework has a limited scope. The limitations of such frameworks disallow extended analysis and multiple perspectives. (It should be noted, however, that Raper’s interpretations strongly rely on the intricacies of the text itself also, an approach valorized by the Formalists of the decades prior to Raper’s work.) What may be happening is that Raper’s framework, and other work similar to Raper’s, is gaining disregard and as a result so is the work’s subject, Glasgow. The consequence is a classic example of “throwing the baby out with the bathwater,” a proverbial danger.

Another possible explanation for Glasgow’s dismissal from the canon and literary criticism altogether is that the New Critics of the mid-twentieth century gravitated toward other Southern authors’ more experimental characters, plots, syntax,
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and diction. Such literary elements are gold mines for critics that adhere strictly to the text. However, Glasgow’s texts are intricate despite following a less experimental and less poetic novel structure than some of her contemporaries. Catherine Rainwater, an American Literature professor and editor of the *Ellen Glasgow Newsletter*, explains why Formalists may disregard Glasgow’s prose: “[F]ormalist ‘close reading’ is extraordinarily sensitive to language and form… it tends to marginalize works [such as Glasgow’s] not resembling the rhetorically flamboyant poetry that inspired the method in the first place” (8). While there is not much “flamboyance” to critique in Glasgow’s prose, more criticism should be generated on Glasgow’s construction of physical and metaphorical landscape to create symbolic depth, and on the fated characters which illumine the tenor of those landscapes. So while New Critics have all but abandoned Glasgow, whose structures are too predictable and whose prose is too pedestrian, more attention should be paid to the alternate ways that Glasgow infuses nontraditional, artful subtleties into her work, perhaps especially as those nontraditional elements relate to gender.

Gender is another critical construct that is of unavoidable importance in a study of Glasgow. It is also another possible cause for the marginalization of Glasgow and her work. Pamela R. Matthews, author of *Ellen Glasgow and a Woman’s Traditions*, addresses Glasgow’s gender marginalization and misinterpretation among critics: “The history of Glasgow’s critical fate demonstrates remarkably well not only the difficulties she must have faced in determining her own place [as a woman writer] but also the subsequent difficulties we have had in placing her life and work accurately” (3). A prime example of the “difficulties we have had” is in placing *Barren Ground’s*
protagonist, Dorinda. As a young woman in Pedlar’s Mill, Dorinda experiments with youthful love. After a jaded encounter with Jason Greylock, she represses emotionality and sexuality completely and leaves the South for New York. She later returns to care for her ailing parents and takes over the family estate, Old Farm. She restores the land to a bountiful harvest, enters a celibate marriage with Nathan Pedlar, and tends to a dying Jason and his estate, Five Oaks. On the one hand, she conveys atypical traits for a fictionalized Southern woman: physical and emotional strength, financial independence, and a propensity for agrarianism. Yet concurrently, traditionally feminine themes are woven through Dorinda’s plot: unrequited love, sacrifice, matrimony, nurture of the frail, and Dorinda’s unique variety of maternity. Glasgow’s lack of commitment to either traditional or progressive gender values may be another cause of the noted dearth of criticism. She is too close to the center of the gender value spectrum, hesitating to commit to either side, and so the critics on neither end will claim her.

Raper captures the import of Glasgow’s work, regardless of the critical approach applied – Freudian, historical, biographical, Formal, Feminist, et cetera:

Ellen Glasgow’s *Barren Ground* (1925) stands squarely in the doorway through which the tradition of southern writing passes from the often barren past into its fruitful modern period. The novel appeared mid-way between the book publication of H. L. Mencken’s scornful but inspiring essay, “The Sahara of the Bozart,” and the annus mirabilis of southern literature, 1929-1930… [T]he novel’s position in time implies that the book must have cast a significant shadow across the southern
imagination of the decade that followed. If so, Glasgow’s remarkable use of the land ought to hold special interest for critics. (79)

Raper expresses that Glasgow is situated such that she cannot be ignored in Southern Literature. She is an artistic gateway to the cultural landscape of the Modern South. Even if more contemporary trends in literary criticism do not find the literary depth or experimentation in Glasgow that they do in other Southern Renaissance authors (though that point is arguable), eco-criticism and Cultural Studies should pay more attention to Glasgow, an important “doorway” to Southern writing.

Eco-criticism, rising out of the 1980s, the same decade that largely left Glasgow behind, could find richness in analyzing Glasgow’s work as a means toward understanding the relationship between Virginian farmers and the environment. Two tenets of eco-criticism which Greg Garrard identifies as important are 1) “[T]he ecological consequences of both wealth and poverty,” and 2) “[I]deologies considered hostile toward the environment such as consumerism, Christianity, and patriarchy.” Both tenets of eco-criticism could find meaningful depth in Glasgow’s portrait of the South, especially considering Glasgow’s agrarian-infused fiction and the South’s historical treatment of, and relationship with, the land.

Cultural Studies is another example of a contemporary critical lens that has largely, though arguably wrongfully, abandoned Glasgow. Perhaps the culture of the South is one that raises too much guilt as Walter Sullivan (d. 2006), a Southern novelist from Nashville and literary professor at Vanderbilt University, explained regarding his own Southern upbringing in a roundtable discussion held at University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill on the problems of the South:
There was always what we can call a sense of guilt. Nobody was moved, I suppose, to do anything about the situation. But it was always there, you know, and, damn it, you couldn’t live your life without the gnawing, perhaps even subconscious, sense that the world was not really all right. What this meant was that you were forever seeing a concrete example of your own flawed humanity. (qtd. in Rubin and Holman 143)

Perhaps Glasgow is falsely regarded as a has-been literary contributor because to recognize her portrait of the Modern South, littered with reminders of slavery and supremacy, injustice and intolerance – Glasgow is certainly guilty of it all – is a picture of American history that conjures too much guilt in the reader to be considered artistic. Such grim undertones and reminders of “flawed humanity” cannot be avoided in Glasgow’s work and, frankly, they rightly make the reader and critic uncomfortable. Thankfully, since Glasgow, the South has changed shape in every way possible – geographical, ideological, socioeconomic, political – but change for the better was happening in Glasgow’s era also, even in Glasgow’s work. Glasgow did not reach the level of racial understanding, especially, expected by contemporary mainstream American culture, and thus contemporary criticism, but American culture and criticism today hopefully has not reached the understanding it will have in the future.

Nonetheless, culture is progressing and in order to understand such progression and perpetuate it, the past must be regarded as a stepping stone, for better or for worse, toward the present, not an abandoned notion from which the present has wholly diverted. The latter is a false assumption, though tempting, because then the present need not feel the guilt of the past. In order to understand contemporary Southern
mentality, the past, including Glasgow, has to be analyzed for its contributions to both progress and the status quo, not ignored or forgotten.

Cultural Studies has taken an interest in Southern culture in general, though not specifically Glasgow, as the South provides a wealth of regional depth worthy of analysis relating to contemporary American Literature. In “The Secret Properties of Southern Regionalism: Gender and Agrarianism in Glasgow’s Barren Ground,” Tanya Ann Kennedy explains, “The subject of regionalism has once again become a preoccupation of cultural criticism” (40). Glasgow’s region is Richmond, VA, disguised as Pedlar’s Mill in Barren Ground. Her region is part of the South, yet boasts a unique fusion of inhabitants, climate, history, and culture that Barren Ground illumines so vividly. Cultural Studies critics who undertake Glasgow should ask questions such as the following: How is the South defined (cf. Reed), and how is Glasgow’s Southern region, the Tidewater, unique? What is its cultural landscape? How and why does it impact Glasgow’s art? What is the fate for men and women who comprise the South? What is the fate for humanity according to the South?

Barren Ground (1925) seeks to answer all of those questions and the result is a portrait of the Modern South through one artist’s pen. Consequently, this paper will seek to unearth Barren Ground’s answers to those questions. The novel’s characters and setting reveal how the South both solidifies and challenges why humans behave as they do. If criticism on Glasgow begins to blossom again following the more current trends of scholarship, especially Cultural Studies, a richer picture of the Southern literary landscape will unfold.
Given the aforementioned, the objective of the forthcoming discussion is to fill, in a small part, the contemporary critical gap on Glasgow, if only through patching a small corner of it. The thesis will be limited to a discussion of Glasgow’s *Barren Ground*, the novel that the author herself marked as her most important work. Such a limitation is a practical one considering the decades over which Glasgow’s prolific career spanned. The limitation is also a choice based on the depth with which Glasgow explores her protagonist Dorinda and the land.

More specifically, an attempt will be made to understand how such a mediation, as exemplified through Dorinda, reflects the mediation of Glasgow herself. In *Barren Ground*, Glasgow’s round, though incomplete, usage of the tenets of the Southern landscape parallel Dorinda’s round, though incomplete character as juxtaposed with the other characters in the novel. The result is, through Glasgow’s protagonist and her authorial style, a sense that the reality of the world is incomplete, though rounded, and fate is determining, though malleable. Glasgow pushes limitations through her characters which demonstrates progress and onto her characters which demonstrates the *status quo*. Glasgow and Dorinda explore the very real human situations of cautiousness and compromise and reasons why humans choose such paths. Extreme examples of human behavior often glean the most attention and the plight of the cautious is lost. But such a plight is the reality where most humans exist. Glasgow creates a life for herself and for Dorinda that outwardly embraces progress but inwardly clings to the *status quo*.

Rainwater explains that Glasgow’s fence-sitting between tradition and evolution is a reason for critical oversight:
Glasgow’s works are situated in relation to three intertwined, literary historical developments: the “Southern renascence” movements of the early twentieth century, the New Critical hegemony during the middle years of the century, and a narrowly defined Modernist aesthetic that has prevailed throughout most of the century. Each of these developments implies perceptual and evaluative frames of reference that are ill-matched to Glasgow’s achievement. In short, as so much contemporary critical theory reveals, our ways of seeing literature are also ways of not seeing, and our insights as well as our blindness have frequently operated at Glasgow’s expense. (qtd. in Taylor and Longest 4)

Rainwater points out a truth about Glasgow’s art, but also a larger truth that literary frameworks both promote and limit conversations. Perhaps even criticism itself, with its oversight of authors such as Glasgow, suffers a plight, along with Glasgow and Dorinda, of embracing progress and simultaneously cementing the status quo despite itself.

A word on the scope of this thesis prior to proceeding: The thrust of the analysis and argument within this thesis centers on the topics of land, body, and fate, and their intersections. The analysis is meant to lift some of the “blindness,” as Rainwater phrased it, that literary criticism has directed toward Glasgow. This analysis is limited to these few elements, and intentionally blind to others, in an attempt to contribute something new to the contemporary discussion on Glasgow and highlight ways through which Glasgow’s portrait of the South is unique and meaningful.
Plot Synopsis

Before delving into the analysis and argument on which this thesis is based, some time should be devoted to the structure, or “skeleton,” of the novel. The skeleton of the novel is divided into three highly symbolic parts which are each linked to the land in their titles: “Broomsedge,” “Pine,” and “Life-Everlasting.” These three types of vegetation are perceived as useless by the Southern farmers of Pedlar’s Mill. The first section of the novel, Broomsedge, is the story of a young woman, “a tall girl, not beautiful, scarcely pretty even according to the waxen type of the [eighteen] ‘nineties’” (Glasgow 10), living in Virginia, north of Richmond. The early chapters of the novel introduce the lineage of the Oakleys, Dorinda’s family. Her father Joshua is a hard-working farmer, though class-bound as a poor white. The third-person, limited narrator says of Joshua that, “He was a good man and a tireless labourer; but that destiny which dogs the footsteps of ineffectual spirits pursued him from the hour of his birth” (9). Joshua is married to Dorinda’s mentally unstable mother Eudora, again, a hard-working but fruitless laborer with a “suppressed religious mania” of the Presbyterian variety (9). Dorinda is flanked on both sides by her brothers, Josiah the “silent, hardworking man of thirty” and Rufus “a handsome boy of eighteen” (39).

In addition to helping on the family farm, Old Farm, Dorinda works at the store near the train station in her hometown of Pedlar’s Mill. The store is owned by Nathan Pedlar, an honestly simple man with clownish physical features, husband to Rose Emily, a dying, benevolent, young mother. The Pedlars kindle a romance between Dr. Jason Greylock, a spineless sycophant, and Dorinda. Jason returns to Pedlar’s Mill after medical training and learning about new farming techniques in the North, to care for his
ailing father, a former doctor and an alcoholic, at the Greylock farm, Five Oaks. Jason and Dorinda stir up a whirlwind romance resulting in pregnancy, all the while Jason is betrothed to Geneva Ellgood of Green Acres, a superficial, dense woman from a wealthier class. At the conclusion of “Broomsedge,” a week prior to the wedding planned for Dorinda and Jason, Dorinda learns not only of Jason’s betrothal to Geneva, but of Jason and Geneva’s weekend elopement. Dorinda resolves to be “finished with all that sort of thing” (237), referring to sex and romantic love. Her recurring resolve sends a flustered, heartbroken Dorinda packing for New York City and points to Dorinda’s life-long resignation of her emotional self.

Part Two of the novel, “Pine,” is Dorinda’s first and likely sole experience outside of the South. While looking for work, she is struck in the street and hospitalized. The injuries result in the miscarriage of her unborn child. Dr. Faraday cares for her in the hospital and he and his wife invite Dorinda into their home to work as a secretary and nanny. Dorinda fits in well with the family and earns the family’s trust. While in New York, Dorinda is exposed to music and progressive farming methods through the generosity of Dr. Burch. Burch has a romantic interest in Dorinda, but she reiterates that she is “through with all of that.” After approximately two years with the Faradays, news comes to New York that Joshua Oakley is very ill.

Equipped with a new sense of independence and knowledge, Dorinda makes the train ride back to Pedlar’s Mill to care for her ailing parents. Along with independence and knowledge, she is equipped with a loan from the Faradays to implement new farming techniques at Old Farm and bring life to a farm that has been nearly barren. Joshua dies shortly after Dorinda’s return to the farm. Dorinda begins a dairy farm. The
work of the dairy is grueling, but the farm begins to experience success for the first time in generations. One day, when Eudora returns home from Richmond after Rufus’s murder trial, she goes to bed and remains there for the rest of her life, nearly a year, dying at age sixty-two.

Eudora’s death, Rufus’s recklessness, and Josiah’s marriage, make Dorinda the owner of Old Farm. Nathan Pedlar, widower of Rose Emily and single-parent to their four children, proposes marriage to Dorinda and is denied repeatedly by the woman who “has finished with all of that.” At age thirty-three, Dorinda accepts the proposal under the condition that the couple live celibately. The marriage makes Dorinda step-mother to the Pedlar children, though she does not assume a maternal role, except toward her step-son John Abner who has a club foot. Nathan and the children move to Old Farm and Nathan is instrumental in continuing the success of the farm which has recently become profitable after Dorinda repays her start-up debts.

The newlywed couple hears that Five Oaks, the Greylock’s overrun farm, is up for auction because Jason has not paid his taxes. Dorinda quickly resolves to buy Five Oaks. Jason is forced to move into a small home on a small plot of land with one black servant.

“Life-Everlasting,” the third and final section of the novel, spans several decades, until Dorinda is in her fifties (as was Glasgow when she wrote Barren Ground). “Life-Everlasting” is largely the restoration story of Five Oaks, as Dorinda implements her farming techniques and puts to use the hard-working “vein of iron” her heritage bequeathed her. “Life-Everlasting” is also filled with Dorinda’s philosophizing on character and fate. Fluvanna, a black servant, becomes Dorinda’s most intimate
relationship, but the racial and employer/employee barriers are never broken. John Abner and Dorinda share a mutual love for one another as step-mother and step-son. Nathan Pedlar dies a hero’s death while saving women and children from a deadly winter train wreck. In the end, the plot returns to the relationship between Jason and Dorinda. Jason has been destroyed by alcoholism and the agriculturally and financially successful Dorinda takes Jason to Old Farm to keep Jason comfortable, arguably to his detriment, releasing him from the poorhouse, in his last miserable months. Jason’s death is uneventful and lonesome. Dorinda shares with John Abner that the land will someday belong to him and the novel concludes.

Chapter I Conclusion

Having recapitulated the basic plot structure of the novel, several topics relating to land, body, and fate will be explored over the subsequent chapters in an attempt to lift some of the critical “blindness” that has been directed toward Glasgow. Chapter II will explore the historical, geographical, and cultural elements of the Modern South both important to and ignored in Barren Ground. The argument will be made that given the depth of the land’s role in the novel, the land becomes one of the novel’s characters. Chapter III is an explanation of the intersections between land and body in the novel, focused especially on the novel’s three parts and the symbolic connections between those parts and the narrative arc. Chapter III will also explore Glasgow’s plot manipulation which makes Dorinda both a victor and a victim. Chapter IV emphasizes the thematic meaning Glasgow imparts with the use of fate as it applies to her various characters as they exist on the land and within their bodies, and the significance of Glasgow’s own argument, “Character is fate.”
Chapter II

FUNCTION AND FICTION:
THE LANDSCAPE OF THE SOUTH

The importance of the land in *Barren Ground* cannot be overstated. As such, it is fitting to begin the first in-depth chapter of this discussion focused on the land as it is used in the novel and the land as it historically existed in the Modern era. Glasgow relies on the land to structure her novel, both in its true function and in her fictional creation of its inhabitants. As described in the previous chapter, the “skeleton” of the novel, its structure, is directly linked to the land. The structure is fitting because the land is also the body, the being, of Southern culture and such importance is obvious throughout the plot of *Barren Ground*.

**Historical Background of the Southern Land, specifically Richmond, Virginia**

The novel’s three parts – “Broomsedge,” “Pine,” and “Life-Everlastin g” – are the body of literary work in the sense that they comprise the novel’s structure, but they are also the body of literal work in the sense that the vegetation is that which the characters toil against as Southern farmers. The vegetation is also symbolic of the characters’ development, chiefly Dorinda, as their bodies struggle to combat the untamed land.

The history of the land and its botanical and human inhabitants precede Dorinda’s plot. Before Dorinda has her own symbolic and literal battles against
broomsedge, pine, and life-everlasting, they had taken root and were dominating the South. The struggle against the land and for the land in the true history preceding the novel impacts the struggles Dorinda and the South face in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In her 1972 critical work, *The Folk of Southern Fiction*, Merrill Maguire Skaggs warns against the assumption of the twentieth-century “Southern Renascence” which suggests it “blossomed miraculously rootless in the stoniest ground” (220, emphasis added). *Barren Ground* does give credence to the story before Dorinda’s story, to the roots. The first chapter of the novel is dedicated to the fictional genealogy of Pedlar’s Mill, who and what was there before the events of the novel. Such attention to the past at the outset of the novel is apropos considering the true history of the South. The nineteenth century destroyed the South, scourging it with war and defeat; it was a cultural and literal battlefield. A landscape of victimization and devastation took hold, choking life from the land and its people. A location that underwent one of the more dramatic defeats and cultural shifts was Richmond, Virginia.

Susan Goodman, a biographer of Glasgow, highlights the important fact that Richmond, Virginia was the capital of the Confederacy (1), not merely a second-string factor during the Civil War. Goodman also notes that by the time Glasgow was born in Richmond, it was in marked cultural flux. Richmond was a key element of the Confederate Civil War effort and experienced dramatic changes after its surrender. In “Two in Richmond,” Louis D. Rubin, Jr. phrases it this way: “Lost Cause though it was, the Confederate tradition was of sustaining importance in Richmond” (115). While *Barren Ground* does give much credit to Pedlar’s Mill’s fictional history, it is
noteworthy that both the Civil War and World War I are only mentioned briefly and tangentially in the novel. In the final section of the novel, WWI is finally and almost casually dropped into the prose:

[The years after Nathan’s death] were years of relentless endeavor, for a world war was fought and won with the help of the farmers… the war came no nearer to [Dorinda] than a battle in history. There was none of the flame-like vividness that suffused her mother’s memories of the starving years and the burning houses of the Confederacy. (Glasgow 460)

Through the narrator, Dorinda proceeds to reflect briefly on the concept of war, but the prose quickly returns to the plot of the novel. When the narrator does mention WWI, the emphasis is still placed on the land by way of the farmers’ effort in the victory. Glasgow’s agrarian tendencies are pervasive and even a world war does not detract her from her focus on the land.

The relationship, and lack thereof, of the novel with the wars, while curious, does place Glasgow in her literary era. The narrator spends chapters on the fictional history of Pedlar’s Mill and it is clear that that history is important to the characters who inhabit it. Yet when it comes to the historical impact of the war, of colossal import to Virginia in the decades the novel is set, there is little mention. Such dissociation with WWI, especially, reflects the impact of the Modernist era on Glasgow. A brief introduction to “Modernism / Modernist” in The Palgrave Guide to English Literature and Its Contexts explains that WWI is a pivotal element on which Modernism hinges. The introduction purports that Modernism uses the art-object to “ward off the destructive chaos” of WWI. In distancing her characters from WWI, Glasgow appears
to “ward off” the confusion and turmoil of WWI as a Modernist would. Glasgow’s protagonist also fits Modernist elements, such as her practical commitment to human innovation and her turn to technology to aid in reworking her environment, an environment scorched by the past.

While the impact of the wars is lacking in *Barren Ground*, the impact of Virginia itself at the turn of the century is not. Glasgow, though well-traveled, spent much of her life in Richmond and did nearly all of her writing there. Richmond is part of the Southern Tidewater region and Glasgow has been credited by scholars such as Hugh Holman, cited and echoed by Ted Spivey, as the author who has contributed most definitively to capturing the ethos of that particular region (Spivey 87). The Tidewater region derives its name, as it plainly suggests, from the tide’s effect on the region, especially the high tide. Figure 1 represents Virginia’s Tidewater region as it existed in 1873, the year Glasgow was born into the region and approximately two decades prior to the commencement of the plot of *Barren Ground*. (A rectangle has been added around Richmond to make it more visible.)
Figure 1

Dorinda is not the city-dweller or world-traveler Glasgow was, but their regional breed is the same. For both Glasgow and Dorinda, Richmond and its surrounding area is a meld of the Southern myth of grandeur, a courtly manner, alarming racial tension, economic obliteration, and class supremacy. Blair Rouse explains the culture of early twentieth century Richmond as Glasgow knew it to be:

Ellen Glasgow knew a Richmond which preserved some of the amenities of a small Southern town: the closely knit neighborhoods in which lived people of comparable social and economic status; the acceptance of the stratification which clearly defined the several classes; the available Negro servants who provided labor for an insignificant wage and instructed white children in the code of manners by which they would be expected to live. Yet Richmond was a city in which the code of polite behavior was no longer all-sufficient for the aristocrat and had little meaning for the rising lower class. (18)

The romantic ideals of the South began to fade after Reconstruction and thus the literary culture shifted toward a less mythologized portrayal of the South, and Glasgow’s fiction followed likewise. Goodman credits Glasgow, especially in her earlier work The Voice of the People, as having “been the first novelist, man or woman, to look at the South as a region constantly in transition” (86), a significant accomplishment for an author to achieve.

It is difficult to define a region that is “constantly in transition.” The challenge spurred Glasgow toward over half-a-century of the pursuit to define the South through fiction and define herself as an author as she transitioned between tenets of Modernism, Realism, Feminism, Agrarianism, et cetera. In a chapter titled, “The South,” John
Shelton Reed attempts such a definition of the South, to answer the questions, “What Is It? Where Is It?” Shelton’s research illumined Americans’ perceptions of the South at the end of the twentieth century. Reed posits:

People more or less agree about which parts of the United States are in the South and which aren’t… That tells us something. It tells us that the South is, to begin with, a concept – and a shared one. It’s an idea that people can talk about, think about, use to orient themselves and each other. People know whether they’re in it or not. As a geographer would put it, the South is a ‘vernacular’ region. (5)

Yet Reed concedes that the South is not only an “idea” but “an economically and demographically distinctive place – a poor, rural region with a biracial population, reflecting the historic dominance of the plantation system. One thing the South’s boundaries have set off is a set of distinctive problems, growing out of that history” (5).

Reed also concurs with Southern historian U.B. Phillips who asserted in 1929, four years after Barren Ground’s publication, that the South is also a region distinctive to its weather. The weather promoted its agricultural staples, cotton and tobacco, and thus fostered Southern structures that revolved around those staples, ranging from the slavery system, to agricultural and industrial systems, and even to education and lack thereof (7-12). What Reed and Phillips highlight is that, in the South, the land matters and the environment matters, even down to the weather. The features of the land are so important that the South has been defined by it.

More intangibly than the geography, battle history, or climate of the South, the land of the South also has a distinctive cultural dimension that is important to the definition of the South as well as important to Barren Ground, that is, the Southern...
code of conduct. Two essential elements bolstering the code of conduct in the South are a pervading sense of *noblesse oblige* and a deeply religious heritage. Both elements are important to the educational reforms which occurred in the South at the turn of the century. Southern education was largely funded by financial and religious benefactors in the North who relied on the plantation system to bolster Northern economy. As such, the educational system of the South was aimed at solidifying the Machiavellian mindset that when the upper class prospers, all prosper.

Clinton B. Allison’s article, “The Conference for Education in the South: An exercise in “Noblesse Oblige,”” summarizes conference proceedings that were the propaganda arm driving the Southern education system in the early twentieth century. Allison’s article discusses the intersection of *noblesse oblige* and religion in the Southern education system:

Promises of prosperity through education were, of course, part of the strategy of the campaign. Southern politicians and voters needed to be convinced that there was a tangible payoff for dollars spent on schools. Furthermore, the leaders of the movement unabashedly accepted the protestant ethic; they were convinced that hard work, morality, good government, and economic prosperity were closely related. And they matter-of-factly recognized that the economic well-being of their class was tied to the general prosperity. (43)

The result of the proceedings were years of increased literacy rates among white people, but also another generation of using religiosity to justify social stratification, racism, poor farming techniques, stagnation, et cetera. For example, Calvinism, the sect of Protestantism prevalent in *Barren Ground*, emphasizes doctrines such as salvation
through pre-destination, morality, and hard-work. What results from such a worldview is evidenced through the fate of Joshua Oakley, Dorinda’s father, who “worked hard, after the manner of his class, to lose everything that was left [of his family’s inheritance]” (Glasgow 9). Joshua is an example of a Southerner who works hard out of a sense of duty and honor toward his family, whose morality is strongly linked to Calvinism, and through his conduct and Christianity, perpetually solidifies his ranks among the impoverished. In addition to the tangible elements that define the South, the Modern South operated according to pervasive cultural codes of conduct that valued duty, honor, and benefitting the poor as a covert means of cementing the rank of the prosperous.

A culture so closely woven by its landscape and into its landscape is bound to have problems with its landscape. Problems in Glasgow’s Virginia and, by extension, Dorinda’s Virginia have roots. They grow out of the soil. And so, turning to a closer analysis of that soil will be paramount in a closer analysis of the novel to which the soil belongs.

The Land as Fictional Character

Each element of the Southern landscape – geography, ideology, economics, demographics, and even the climate – is in flux throughout history and thus is part of the history of the land that Dorinda and the other characters inherit and inhabit. Additionally, the land in the South has been of great importance, touching and affecting almost every element of Southern life and culture. Therefore, Barren Ground’s setting is neither static nor isolated. The setting has deep roots; it is an “idea” as Reed argues, and its problems are unique and complex. What results is a sense, for the reader, that the
function of the land in *Barren Ground* is more than a typical setting in a novel, a contrived plot device, a backdrop, or even a symbol. Yes, the land does function in those roles, but more so, in *Barren Ground* the land is actually a character. The characterization of the land is achieved through the land’s history, personality, growth and development, and physical shape.

The first manner in which the land functions as a character, and as aforementioned in the previous section, is that the land has history just as a character would. The land has battle wounds and has been eroded and shaped by the flow of time. The land has families, races, and cultures to which it belongs. The land has rebelled when external forces attempt to make it into something it is not. The land has a face, i.e., unique features that distinguish it from any other and make it markedly Southern.

Secondly, a character, unlike other literary elements, has personality. A character is moody and relational. The land in the novel assumes moods which sometimes reflect the mood of other characters, e.g., when Dorinda contemplates murdering Jason and the thunderstorm builds throughout the scene (Broomsedge, Chapter XIV). But in other instances, the mood of the land is the impetus, setting the tone for the other characters, e.g., the drought, heat, and bugs that suffocate and swarm after Dorinda loses her virginity to Jason (Broomsedge, Chapter X). In the latter example, Dorinda feels liberated and giddy after her sexual encounter with Jason, but the land’s mood tempers Dorinda’s mood, deflating her nearly back to stasis.

In addition to the land’s personality and history, it, like any other character, grows and develops throughout the novel. The natural cycle of a day is expressed through Glasgow’s plentiful passages of imagery. Glasgow dedicates numerous
paragraphs to the land as it is develops with time. One such instance is the narrator’s vivid description of sunrise through Dorinda’s bedroom window:

The faint grey light crept through the dormer-window and glimmered with a diffused waness… The sun rose over the pine; every morning… the twisted black boughs, shaped like a harp, emerge from obscurity. First the vague ripple of dawn, spreading in circles as if a stone had been cast into the darkness, then a pearly glimmer in which objects borrowed exaggerated dimensions; then a blade of light cutting sharply through the pine to the old pear orchard, where the trees still blossomed profusely in spring, though they bore only small green pears out of season. After the edge of brightness, the round red sun would ride up into the heavens and the day would begin. (Glasgow 51)

In the above passage, the day grows out of the landscape and with it the landscape is awakened from sleep just like Dorinda herself. The imagery makes it almost difficult to remember that, indeed, Dorinda is the one rising for the day’s work and not nature herself.

More broadly than the cycle of a day, Barren Ground traces the trajectory of the land through cycles of barrenness and fertility over many seasons. With each cycle, the land develops; in some seasons it is prosperous and giving, while in other seasons it is needy and defeated. The following passage describes the land in its youth, almost as an ingénue:

In May and June, for a brief season between winter desolation and summer drought, the starved land flushed loveliness. Honey-coloured sunlight. The notes of a hundred birds. A roving sweetness of wild grape in the air… the flowerlike
blue of the sky, the songs of birds, and the elusive scent of the wild grape, all seemed to be a part of that rich inner world, with its passionate expectancy and its sense of life burning upward. (108)

Again, when reading such a passage, it is almost difficult to remember that it is the human characters falling in love and not nature herself. At the other end of the life cycle, the land embodies an aged appearance, reminiscent of a fragile-bodied widow wearing her widow’s weeds: “A veil of glittering dust drifted up from the meadows of life-everlasting; in the underbrush by the fences, sumach and sassafras made splashes of crimson and wine-colour; farther away, the changing woods were tossed in broken masses against the cloudless arch of the sky” (497). The above passages of imagery give the land a body which develops and grows with time, just as a human character’s body would react to time.

A counter-argument to the impression that the land functions as a character in Barren Ground may be raised that personification is not the same as characterization. Surely, the argument that the land is a character is Barren Ground does fall short in instances where the land necessarily functions in its stock, novelistic role, that of backdrop, setting, and symbol. Yet the history, personality, and development of the land that is particular to Barren Ground create a sense that the land is more influential than simply providing place and time. Moreover, granted the historical, geographic, and climatic import of the Southern landscape, it would be reasonable to believe that Glasgow intended the land in her novel to be more than setting, but a contributing factor to the action itself.
This chapter has argued that the land’s function in the novel is several layers deep. The land of the South has a distinct body rooted in a true historical time and that body creates work for the human characters. The body of the land is complete with limbs of vegetation that both cradle and choke the other characters. The land awaits a loyal caretaker, like a person awaits a loyal lover. To extend the point even further, the land is the actual body of work, the novel itself.
Chapter III

BONES AND BOTANY: THE LANDSCAPE OF THE BODY

Barren Ground as Body of Work

The previous pages have included a discussion on the importance of the specific land on which the novel is grounded as well as the novelistic use of the land as a character in the novel. The land possesses body-like attributes, as discussed in the previous chapter. The land is also the work of Southern farmers, a group to which Dorinda belongs. As such, the novel will be discussed in this chapter as a body of work relating to the parts of the novel itself, but also relating to the analogic comparisons of the land to the human body in its youth, its escape from youth, and in death. The discussion will look more specifically at the bones that comprise the plot skeleton of the novel, that is, the novel’s three distinct parts: “Broomsedge,” “Pine,” and “Life- Everlasting.” The symbolic importance of the three parts will be analyzed as the vegetation of the South is used to illumine a simultaneously victimized and victorious landscape and inhabitants.

Part 1: Broomsedge and Youth. Broomsedge is a billowing, wheat-like weed that infiltrates the Tidewater region of Virginian farms and strips the land of its fertility. Figure 2 is a photograph of broomsedge during winter in Mississippi. Note especially the hue and expanse of the broomsedge as it covers the land.
Broomsedge symbolizes total consumption in the novel, but Glasgow’s naturalistic imagery suggests that broomsedge is not only a symbol. The broomsedge is a very literal, integral part of the plot of the agrarian novel. While broomsedge is a symbol of consumption, it is also a consuming, physical force that devastates the Southern farms. The name of the vegetation itself is reminiscent of its aesthetic quality, i.e., the edge of a corn broom. The name of the vegetation is also reminiscent of the perpetual struggle against the land, especially for Eudora and Dorinda. The women are constantly sweeping and clearing the dust of the land, but the work is in vain. The dust of the
broomsedge always returns, prevails, and blankets everything it touches. In only the second paragraph of the five-hundred plus page novel, “the broomsedge was spreading in a smothered fire over the melancholy brown of the landscape” (3). The broomsedge engulfs the fields and gives the visual impression of fire, and Glasgow employs burning, flaming fire imagery throughout the first section of the novel, often referencing the broomsedge in her numerous paragraphs of visual imagery.

Matthew Fairlamb, Pedlar’s Mill’s prophetic octogenarian, proclaims that, “broomsage ain’t jest wild stuff. It’s a kind of fate” (4). Matthew gives warning upon Jason’s return to Pedlar’s Mill that Jason should “git away before the broomsage ketches him. Thar’s one thing sartin sure, you’ve got to conquer the land in the beginning, or it’ll conquer you before you’re through with it” (16). Old Matthew’s proclamation echoes in Dorinda’s mind as she considers the recklessness with which her passion for Jason grows in the first part of the novel. Jason recognizes the power of the broomsedge when he tells Dorinda that he does not want “to spend [his] life as a missionary to the broomsedge… If you stay [in Pedlar’s Mill] long enough, the broomsedge claims you, and you get so lazy you cease to care what becomes of you. There’s failure in the air” (115). The consuming, devastating, prevailing nature of broomsedge is a metaphorical tool for Glasgow as she creates Dorinda’s youthful character and sets the scene of the Southern landscape.

Jason and Dorinda’s relationship in “Broomsedge” emphasizes Fairlamb’s point that it is “a kind of fate” and “failure.” Jason and Dorinda’s relationship is fated by the strong Southern code of conduct which values honor, morality, and duty. When Jason is in New York and dates Geneva, his action implies intention and the Southern culture
will not allow Jason to break from his intention; it is his duty to follow through and marry Geneva. Furthermore, Jason, the son of the town doctor, and Geneva, the daughter of the wealthiest land owner, have an obligation to cement the rank of the prosperous in marrying one another, solidifying the social ranks, which, as discussed in the previous chapter, was a twisted means through which the rich considered themselves benevolent toward the poor. Yet, Dorinda appears blind to the code of conduct that binds Jason into marrying Geneva. Dorinda hears rumors of Jason and Geneva’s dating, but the passion of youth consumes her and she dismisses them, even when days go by and she has not heard from the man she plans to marry at the end of the week.

The qualities of broomsedge and youth overlap in the novel and the association is not a kind one. Throughout the novel, a general disdain for both broomsedge and youth is reiterated. Glasgow’s symbolic connection between young Dorinda and broomsedge is evident from the reader’s first sight of Dorinda wearing her “orange-coloured shawl” (3); Dorinda wears the fiery color of broomsedge and the shawl is literally covering her, smothering her, not allowing her head, her mind, to think for itself.

The first sight of Dorinda in her shawl is reminiscent of the reader’s first sight of Alexandra in her cap in Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* Cather’s landscape is Nebraska not Virginia, but the comparisons to Glasgow are so numerous that they require mention. The parallels between Cather’s *O Pioneers!* and Glasgow’s *Barren Ground* are illustrative for the present discussion on land and youth, as Cather’s novel was published only twelve years prior to Glasgow’s and concerns itself with similar themes.
The parallels range from the imagery of the landscapes to the attention granted to youthful romance. One parallel example between the novels is the first sight of Dorinda in her orange shawl compared to the first sight of Alexandra in her brown cap and veil. Alexandra wears, “a round plush cap, tied down with a thick veil.” Soon after she removes, “the brown veil from her head and tied it about [her brother’s] throat” (Cather 14 – 5). The symbolism of the earth-toned headwear of both protagonists lends similar foreshadowing to the plots that unfold. Both scenes fall into the first sections of their respective novels, and the sections are titled such that the reader is reminded of the untamed land – for Glasgow, “Broomsedge,” and for Cather, “The Wild Land.”

While Dorinda suffers from broomsedge and Glasgow’s narrator is highly critical of youth in general, Dorinda is the character that escapes the broomsedge when no other character is able. For example, Eudora Oakley solemnly realizes “that [Eudora] had thrown herself away, in youth, on a handsome face [Joshua]” (Glasgow 43). Eudora was consumed by the fiery passion of youth and it smothered her, just as the broomsedge with its fiery appearance consumes the land and renders it useless. Dorinda fares better than her mother against the broomsedge while coming dangerously close to being consumed by it in her early, passionate relationship with Jason Graylock.

In “Desire and Materiality in Ellen Glasgow’s Barren Ground,” Shawn E. Miller defends Dorinda’s character as one who grows in understanding throughout the novel, misreading her world as a youth in “Broomsedge,” but maturely understanding her world by the time the novel concludes. Miller argues that Dorinda’s most significant misreading in “Broomsedge” is her relationship with Jason Greylock (85). Dorinda would likely agree as she laments over her relationship with Jason for her entire life. It
is in Dorinda’s life-long reflections on her relationship with Jason in her youth that she is the most regretful. A pessimism for youth/broomsedge has a strong foothold in the novel’s tone.

Neither the broomsedge nor youth is treated kindly in the plot of the novel or in Dorinda’s own mind. The powerful force of broomsedge is reflected even in the length of that section of the novel, nearly twice the length of any other section. As the novel continues in the other sections, “Pine” and “Life-Endless,” memories, mistakes, and resolves from “Broomsedge” drive Dorinda’s choices and she uses the North, and an unhealthy commitment to restoring the land from broomsedge, to flee from the consuming, fiery vegetation of her youth. Later in this chapter, more attention will be paid to Dorinda’s youth and its role on Dorinda’s victimization.

**Part 2: Pine and Escape.** Pine serves as a retreat in the novel from the oppressive landscape of the South. During most of the second section of the novel, Dorinda lives in New York, farther north than she has ever been. The botanical image that Glasgow chooses for the section is fitting as pine is often a type of vegetation commonly associated with the North, yet it is still a type of vegetation that is prevalent in the South. On several occasions, the Oakleys consider selling the pine on their land, but they conclude that it will not generate them much income; they perceive the timber is valueless. Such a false conclusion on the part of the Oakleys is telling regarding their inattention to progress and perpetual adherence to the procedures of prior generations, even to their detriment.

In his article, “Growth of the Lumber Industry (1840 – 1930),” Tony Howe explains the spike of the lumber industry in the Southern United States during the
second half of the nineteenth century and lasting until the Great Depression. Howe explains that, “[S]ettlers considered the millions of acres of forests as little more than obstacles to be removed in order to start developing farms.” The Oakleys adhere to a similar opinion about the pine on their land. Yet, with inventions such as the circular saw and railroad transportation, and the “exhaustion of timber supplies in the North and East,” the lumber industry in the South became profitable quickly circa 1850, especially in Mississippi and Louisiana. The news of the usefulness of the lumber does not appear to have reached Pedlar’s Mill, however. In the novel, pine is another symbolic reminder that the former ideas regarding agriculture were crippling to the land’s potential and the farmers’ success.

The hearty nature of pine, a contrast to the billowing nature of broomsedge, is also a symbol of strength that edges on stubbornness, especially the “harp-shaped pine” that recurs as a symbol throughout the novel. That particular pine tree is special to Joshua, perhaps reminding Joshua of himself, strong and steady. The presence of the pine tree outside of his window brings Joshua peace as he approaches death and hovers above him even after death when his body is placed “into the hollow beneath the great pine in the graveyard” (Glasgow 300). The pine is a symbol of strength and endurance.

Pine’s visual attributes are also symbolic. Pine is a tall, green tree which contrasts the low-lying reddish quality of the broomsedge. The height of the pine is reminiscent of the distance Dorinda travels from the South. It is also noteworthy that in “Pine” Dorinda finds herself physically higher than she has ever been in her life. The first room she rents in New York is “over a cheap restaurant” (201). As Dorinda explores the city she realizes, “The buildings in New York were so high. She wondered
people weren’t afraid to go to the top of them” (213). When she awakens in the hospital room after the accident that caused her miscarriage, she looks “[t]hrough the high window” (224). Dorinda’s physical distance from the South parallels her “heightened” sense of self-understanding in Pine as well as her “heightened” intellect as she is exposed to music and lectures.

**Part 3: Life-Everlasting and Legacy.** The final section of the novel is titled after yet another unusable type of vegetation, life-everlasting (*Anaphalis Margaritacea*). Contrasting both the red broomsedge and the green pine, life-everlasting produces a white flower on the tips of its low-lying greenery, as captured in Figure 3 on the following page.
In the final section of the novel, death drives the plot, most notably the death of Nathan in the winter and Jason in the fall. Thus the title for the section, “Life-Everlasting,” is appropriate as death becomes the main thrust of the plot and completes the life-cycle begun with youth in “Broomsedge.” The seasons of the year in which both men die are fitting as they are important deaths and winter and fall are seasons associated with the death of the landscape. The importance of the deaths is somewhat surprising though, in how they play out in the plot.

Firstly, it is unexpected that Nathan’s death is not overly tragic for his widow, Dorinda:
Though she was overwhelmed by the general tragedy, she was without a keen sense of widowhood. Something within her soul, that thin clear flame which was herself, remained unshaken by her loss, as it had remained unshaken by every tragedy but one in her life. She was leaving Nathan, with regret but not with grief, to his belated popularity. (445)

Nathan’s death is important to the people of Pedlar’s Mill as they celebrate him for his bravery in sacrificially saving others from the train wreck. Meanwhile, the people of Pedlar’s Mill forget that in his lifetime, the community generally viewed Nathan as a clownish oaf. And yet, the community grieves sincerely. On the other hand, over the course of their nine-year marriage, Dorinda knew the strength of Nathan’s humble character, saw him as more than an oaf, yet she is left without grief. Nathan becomes a town legend and only in his legend does Dorinda feel the satisfaction that she never felt in her marriage to him: “Nathan’s victorious death had filled the aching void in her heart… Yes, it was something, Dorinda assured her rebellious heart, to have been married to a hero” (470-1). Nathan’s tomb is extravagantly decorated with flowers and a large, stone monument, donated by the members of the community.

Compared to Nathan’s death, Jason’s death is inversely important to the other characters in *Barren Ground*. In his younger years, Jason was perceived as a travelled, intelligent man, educated in medicine and progressive farming methods. In the early years of Jason’s medical practice, people trusted him to heal. But by the end of his life, no one in the town cares that Jason dies. Jason’s tomb is marked by two simple, flat stones John Abner finds in the woods nearby Jason’s burial plot, a contrast to Nathan’s tall, community-sponsored monument. Jason has no one left to care for him at the end
of his life and so Dorinda brings him from the poorhouse to Five Oaks to care for him. In an agitated episode, Dorinda resolves that Jason needs to live out his life comfortably at Five Oaks (“Life-Everlasting,” Chapter VII). Yet, she repeatedly questions herself, “Why am I doing this?” (492). Whereas there was much reason for Dorinda to be affected by the death of Nathan and she is left nearly unfeeling, Dorinda admits there is little reason for her to be affected by the impending death of Jason, yet she cares deeply. Dorinda tries to rationalize why she is so insistent that Jason die at Five Oaks: “After all, it was not her feeling or lack of feeling for [Jason], it was the poorhouse and her horror of the poorhouse that decided his fate” (492). But the rationalizations are not convincing as her question remains, “Why am I doing this?” and her rationalizations remain unconvincing. Even Jason asks of her the same question.

One possible explanation for why Dorinda insists that Jason die at Five Oaks is linked to the title of the section, “Life-Everlasting.” When Jason eventually dies at the mercy of Dorinda, she achieves eternal victory over Jason. Dorinda solidifies her own legacy as one that outlasted Jason’s. While he had taken away her virginity, trust, and any possibility of romance, she takes his pride and his land. He dies completely dependent on her generosity. Dorinda’s ownership and restoration of Jason’s land is the strongest symbol of Dorinda’s victory in the face of Jason’s failure. Such a reading makes it difficult to perceive Dorinda’s welcome of dying Jason into her home and redemption from the poorhouse as wholly benevolent or kind, though it is an example of the Southern noblesse oblige. There is a vein of sinister vengeance in Dorinda’s generosity. Jason dies dejected and alone and Dorinda is there to quietly observe him in his misery.
The name of the vegetation Life-Everlasting, and the contrasting deaths of Nathan and Jason in the final section, leave lingering questions regarding what matters in life and what creates a legacy. As the discussion continues to unfold, the role that fate plays in creating a person’s legacy will be analyzed.

Glasgow’s symbolic use of the three parts of the novel brings depth to the reader in understanding the life cycle of the land and its people. The three-part structure gives the novel its skeleton but it also gives the characters a body of work in which to fit. Returning to the metaphor with which this chapter began, the land is the body of work in *Barren Ground* in the sense that it is the three-part structure of the novel; it is the setting, plot, and character of the novel, and in the sense that it is the physical object which is labored against throughout the lives of the characters. Both sides of the idiom, *body* and *work*, are quintessential in *Barren Ground*.

**Dorinda as Body of Work**

Dorinda’s backbone is her most definitive quality, that is, both her physical body and her stalwart attitude toward life. Through the novel’s structure and symbolism, the backbone of Dorinda’s culture, the land, is linked to the backbone of Dorinda’s body, her physical and sexual landscape. The first indication of the intersection between body and land in the novel is apparent is the novel’s title. On the surface, *Barren Ground* refers to the uselessness of the land. The land that at one time was the sustenance of the ancestors of Pedlar’s Mill becomes a burden. Generations pass that see the land and its people being destroyed by its history. Other generations, such as Eudora and Joshua’s generation, do not observe the brunt of the destruction, but live the after effects of it, never seeing the fertility restored to the land that Dorinda was able to experience.
However, the title *Barren Ground* has a metaphorical meaning more profound than simply referring to the land itself.

While Dorinda sees fertility restored to “barren ground” unlike her ancestors, a closer analysis of the novel reveals that the barren ground has not dissipated, but rather shifted from external to internal. After Dorinda’s relationship with Jason, the barren ground becomes her own body. The stubborn, unrelenting weeds that destroyed the land are internalized in Dorinda. First, the broomsedge consumes her with passion for Jason, then she retreats in the pine trees, removing herself briefly from the landscape while in New York, only to return to the South and give life everlasting back to the soil while solidifying her victory over Jason. Her work on the land bears fruit, but her work kills her youthful passion, her pursuit of love, and her immortality through motherhood.

In her defense against an auto-biographical interpretation of *Barren Ground*, “Erotic Economy of *Barren Ground*: How Success Almost Spoiled Dorinda,” Dianne Bunch argues that a theme of the novel is that the “accumulation of material creates a desolation of the spirit” (15), suggesting that as Dorinda becomes materially successful and victorious over the land, she sacrifices her body, more specifically, her sexuality. (Bunch further argues that Glasgow’s life suggests that the author is sympathetic toward that theme, but also antagonistic toward it.) Bunch analyzes the accumulation and loss of materiality that Dorinda experiences with each of her romantic interests. Firstly, Bunch admits that Jason won in the “matter of sex” and that was a colossal loss for the eventually materially victorious Dorinda that owns Jason’s property (23). Dorinda can never again possess her virginity and her sexual desire; those will always belong to Jason. Dorinda resolves never to experience such a loss again. She resolves that to be
materially successful, i.e., to make her farms profitable, she must rid herself of romantic pursuits and her resolve is evidenced in all of her other potentially romantic relationships. For example, after Nathan’s death, Bob Ellgood offers Dorinda a standing marriage proposal. She rejects the union and Burch argues that such a rejection is not a rejection of love, but of material and metaphorical ownership (26). Burch concludes that ultimately Dorinda “wins in a man’s world to find it worthless” (26); there is something “barren” about Dorinda’s success. Jason claims Dorinda’s sexuality her entire life and so Dorinda pursues the work of the land with the same level of passion one would give to a romance, only to find herself watching Jason die a slow death in her home at the end of the novel and wondering all the while why she is in such a situation.

The land serves as the object into which Dorinda sublimates her sexual feelings. Burch warns against an auto-biographical reading of the novel, though much scholarship on Glasgow comes from the realm of biographical criticism. Even if the novel is not auto-biographical, parallels can be drawn between Glasgow’s sexuality and Dorinda’s sexuality which indicate sublimation. In her biography on Glasgow, Susan Goodman comments, “Glasgow could hate twice as long as most people could love, and love twice as long as most could live” (92). Granted the three decades worth of narration on Dorinda and Jason’s relationship, a similar statement could be directed toward Dorinda. Goodman continues, explaining that the highlighted sections of Glasgow’s copy of the Bhagavad Gita, “articulate her desperate efforts to be strong by extinguishing desire. Writing offered escape and solace, but frequently it proved not enough. Fate had bound her to a wheel she called ‘life,’ which spun her where it willed” (92). Both Dorinda and Glasgow had drawn out, confusing, broken marriage
engagements which caused them to shy away from future romantic pursuits (150ff). As a result, both Glasgow and Dorinda sublimate their repressed sexuality into work; for Dorinda it is the work of the land; for Glasgow it is the work of the pen.

While Freudian literary interpretations have waned in scholarly popularity, such a reading is noteworthy considering Glasgow’s own education and era as briefly discussed in the introductory chapter. Glasgow immersed herself in a wide array of literature, especially after frequent headaches and general distaste for socialization prevented her from attending formal, private school (which she attended for less than one year). Glasgow read Freud and subscribed to his theories for portions of her life (Goodman 18ff). Freudian influence reveals itself in flashes of prose throughout *Barren Ground*.

In an obvious example of Freudian influence, regarding Jason’s relationship with his alcoholic father, the narrator comments, “Filial devotion was both esteemed and practiced in that pre-Freudian age [roughly 1890], before self-sacrifice had been dethroned from its precarious seat among the virtues” (Glasgow 13). This textual example not only reveals the impact of Freud on society after the turn of the century, but it offers insight on Glasgow’s positive reception of Freud’s theories. In the above example, the narrator casts a skeptical glance at self-sacrifice’s “precarious” virtue pre-Freud and the word “precarious” connotes Glasgow’s acceptance of the changes Freud brought to psychology. The influences of Freud, regarding familial motivation, sexual desire, repression and sublimation, are appropriate readings of a text that emerges out of the 1920s, written by a follower of Freud. The resulting barrenness of Dorinda’s
sexuality, an after effect of her sublimation, reveals that Dorinda’s body, through her victory over the land, is a victim.

The Victimization of Dorinda’s Body

The first word that describes Dorinda in the first part of the novel is “girl” (Glasgow 3). Dorinda is a young woman at the outset of the novel, capable of helping significantly on the farm, holding a job, and pursuing romantic interests, but the narrator still chooses what is for her a pejorative noun, “girl.” The extent to which the narrator uses diction such as “girl” with an uncomplimentary connotation becomes evident as the chapters unfold. Scornful commentary on youth is injected throughout the prose, just as scornful commentary is directed toward broomsedge. For example, the narrator is critical of Dorinda’s youthful passion for Jason, stating, “If she had been older, it might have occurred to her that a nature so impressionable [Jason’s] must be lacking in stability” (62, emphasis added). Dorinda later laments her love affair: “If only you could live your life after experience and not before!” (179). While in a discussion in New York, Dorinda relates to the Mrs. Faraday, “They used to say at Old Farm that my head was full of notions,” to which Mrs. Faraday responds, “Most young girls’ heads are” (248 – 9). These few examples capture the overall theme of the novel regarding youth: Youth is meant to be miserably survived, if survived, and eventually reflected on with shame.

*Barren Ground*’s negative tone toward youth casts a similarly negative tone toward youth’s only advantage (as perceived from the novel) – the body. A youthful body is strong, attractive, fertile, and physically superior to an aged body. Because the attractive, fertile body belongs to youth, the force of such qualities in the world is
perceived negatively. Attractiveness and fertility in terms of her body are dismissed as frivolous by Dorinda for the course of almost the entire novel, with the exception of her short-lived affair with young Jason. Yet fertility and beauty in terms of the land is lauded by Dorinda as her greatest achievement.

Again, striking parallels arise between Cather’s and Glasgow’s treatments of youth and land. *O Pioneers!* begins with the poem, “Prairie Spring,” in which both themes – youth and land – are made obvious to the reader before the prose of the novel even commences. The poem could just as easily precede *Barren Ground* as it precedes *O Pioneers!* The short poem reads:

Evening and the flat land,
Rich and somber and always silent;
The miles of fresh-plowed soil,
Heavy and black, full of strength and harshness,
The growing wheat, the growing weeds,
The toiling horses, the tired men;
The long empty roads,
Sullen fires of sunset, fading,
The eternal, unresponsive sky.
Against all this, Youth,
Flaming like the wild roses,
Singing like the larks over the plowed fields,
Flashing like a star out of the twilight;
Youth with its insupportable sweetness,
Its fierce necessity,
Its sharp desire,
Singing and singing,
Out of the lips of silence,
Out of the earthy dusk. (Cather 8)

The steadiness of the land that is “always silent… Heavy and black” is juxtaposed against the vibrant sounds and sights of youth, establishing for the reader youth’s inability to survive on the land without also falling silent. The images of youth in the poem, following the volta, “Against all this, Youth,” become tragic images of defeat. Youth is “Flaming,” “Singing,” and, “Flashing,” but youth, for all its glamour, is “insupportable sweetness.” Youth will crumble and fade into the “eternal, unresponsive sky.” The landscape will overcome and prevail. Despite youth’s flashes of seeming victory and brilliance, youth will fall victim again, and drown in the silence and darkness of the land.

Louis D. Rubin, Jr., one of the most prolific critics of Glasgow, explains Dorinda’s tainted victory:

Her decision to turn her back on those things which as a girl she had most desired – love, affection, sexual fulfillment, a husband and a family… She makes up her mind to become as hard, as unromantic, as business-minded as any man. Her triumph is one of superhuman self-sufficiency over human dependence and love. It is a triumph, most of all, of sterility… Dorinda’s life is a progressive espousal of barrenness. As a woman, she abhors, fears, sexual love… Her choice of the joyless existence is unconvincing: supposedly a
passionate decision, it seems peculiarly cold-blooded, inhuman... as a living, feeling, believable human being, Dorinda ceases to exist once her romantic moment is done. (123)

In her supposedly most victorious action, disowning her youthful desires and fertility, Rubin argues, Dorinda makes herself a victim of an “inhuman” life. Dorinda sacrifices her youthful physicality on the altar of sterile success.

Dorinda’s utilitarianism toward her body is evident through the novel’s description of Dorinda’s clothing. The narrator offers a fair amount of detail as to the adornment of Dorinda’s body in the novel, that is, her fashion. Such detail provides another intersection between the adornment of the body and the adornment of the land. Whereas the clothing Dorinda dons throughout the novel is indicative of her attitude toward her body, the seasons that adorn the landscape are indicative of the attitude of the land. As examined earlier, broomsedge, pine, and life-everlasting each victimize the landscape, changing the landscape’s appearance and reflecting the mood therein.

When Dorinda’s fashion is mentioned, it is generally indicative of weak moments for Dorinda, moments wherein Dorinda succumbs to the lure of physical attraction and missteps on her path toward ridding herself of such fancy. One of the first descriptions the reader receives of Dorinda is of her “orange-coloured shawl” (Glasgow 3). As aforementioned, as the novel unfolds, the shawl comes to represent the oppressive quality of the broomsedge as well as Dorinda’s youth. In her youth, the shawl is identifiable with the allure of Jason, the one who would irreparably hurt her. In another example of the vanity directed toward Dorinda’s fashion, she opts to squander
her saved earnings to purchase a trendy blue dress to attract Jason (“Broomsedge,” Chapter VI).

In a much later example in the novel, Dorinda purchases a new dress to wear for her return to church after decades of abstaining from religion. For years before her return to church, Dorinda wears strictly overalls, the most practical uniform for a farmer, and a bold stylistic choice for a Modern Southern woman. The narrator describes Dorinda’s entrance into the church in her new attire:

As she marched up the aisle, in her handsome, commonplace clothes, she might have been a contented rustic beauty whose first youth was slowly slipping away… she carried the willow-plume high above the dusky cloud of her hair; and the luxurious swish-swish of her satin skirt was as loud as the sound of wind in the grass. (368)

An airy frivolity adorns Dorinda in her new dress while she makes her entrance. Immediately after the description of her entrance and her vain focus on her appearance, Dorinda is met with Jason and the Ellgood family. Dorinda had not seen Jason in years nor had she allowed herself the vanity of appearance in years. In the one moment she gives in to the temptation of concerning herself with her appearance, Jason resurfaces and with him, reminders of the regret she carries for her youthful foolishness.

Dorinda leaves church and, somewhat surprisingly, immediately resolves to marry Nathan. In “Two in Richmond,” Rubin explains, “When a Glasgow heroine contemplates marriage… the problem is usually one of whether to marry beneath her social station or not to wed at all” (121). This problem is precisely Dorinda’s. Nathan is socially beneath her, but she resolves to marry him because she knows he will be useful
to her on the farm and for no other reason. When Jason looks her way at church, she
admits, “that the part of her that was sex withered and died; but something more ancient
than sex came to her rescue, and this was the instinct of self-preservation which had
made her resolve in her youth that no man should spoil her life” (Glasgow 401).
Dorinda, upon seeing Jason, is reminded not only of her regret, but her resolve that no
man will ruin her. She feels confident to move forward with a celibate marriage with
Nathan because it offers her a greater chance at material victory, at the same time,
solidifying the bodily sacrifice of her sexuality, making her a victim of her youth and
her own stubbornness for the rest of her life.

Bones and Botany Conclusion

Much of the analysis of the interplay between land and body revolves around
Dorinda’s youth and “Broomsedge.” However, the novel ends with Dorinda in her sixth
decade and “Pine” and “Life- Everlasting” comprise two of three sections of the novel.
Yet so much emphasis is placed on Dorinda’s youth and the first section of the novel
(which, in terms of the novel’s length, comprises nearly half of the novel). Even in the
latter sections of the novel, the reader is constantly reminded of Dorinda’s youth and
her struggle against the broomsedge. The constant reminders point toward another
strongly thematic element in the novel.

In addition to land and body, a third element of the novel plays a dominant role:
fate. Fate weaves itself into the narrative with a similar, inexhaustible pervasiveness. As
much as the landscape plays a dominant role in the novel, fate is equally dominant. It
makes sense, then, that “Broomsedge” is so strongly emphasized. If fate is a major
element of the novel, the beginning of the novel matters more than the end. Or to state it
another way, the beginning of the novel dictates the end and so what the reader learns at the beginning is only reflected in the rest of the novel. The climax of the story, for example, is Dorinda’s relationship with Jason. Their relationship occurs in the first section of the novel. A more traditional novelistic structure saves the climax for later in the plot, but not in *Barren Ground*. The remainder of the novel, after Jason’s marriage to Geneva, is all falling action.

Up to this point, attention has been paid to the historical and cultural fate of the South and, by extension, the novel. Intersections between land and body have been uncovered through a close character analysis of Dorinda. The last chapter of this discussion will move from analysis into synthesis. In other words, the earlier chapters attempt to answer the question, “Why?” whereas the later chapter will seek to answer the question related to meaningfulness. In many instances, episodes that have been analyzed previously through the Cultural Studies lens and with a Formalist-inspired analysis will be revisited in the last chapter, but with the aim to draw conclusions and put the pieces of the novel together rather than take them apart. Metaphorically, in many instances, the reader will be asked to drive down the same road, but this time, look at different scenery, in this case, the scenery of fate.
Chapter IV

THE FRUITS OF FATE:
THE VICTORIOUS DIMENSION OF DORINDA’S NATURE

Originally, the remainder of this thesis paper sought to answer the question: “Does the land determine the characters’ fates?” However, the answer to that question quickly became multi-faceted and messy. There is no neat, clean-cut way to pinpoint a single mechanism of fate within the novel. In the Preface to *Barren Ground*, Glasgow informs the reader, “Character is fate” (ix). While that equation seems simple enough—character and fate are synonymous—Glasgow’s pervasive realism complicates the source of fate, that is, character. For one character, in one instance, the source of fate can be found. To broaden that source claim into a sweeping argument for the novel at large, however, poses significant problems. Glasgow complicates her characters, her plots, and the Southern setting to prevent the reader from neatly attributing cause to effect. What follows, then, is an exploration of the many fates at play in the novel among a few of its characters. Rather than answering the question of causation, it will seek to answer questions of implication.

Metaphorically, if the characters of *Barren Ground* are on a ship tossed by the seas of a few fatalistic forces, in this case, Calvinism, gender, and parentage, and the characters are blown about by the winds of psychology and personality, Dorinda emerges as the character best able to captain the ship. Is the course of a knowledgeable
captain negligible amidst the treacherous tide? Perhaps. Despite the ways in which Dorinda is a victim, Dorinda’s character represents the best, though arguably futile, system of navigation.

Before embarking on a closer analysis of Dorinda’s aptitude for navigating the multiple fates at play in her world, it is important to look more closely at a few of those fates, so as to understand the complex world Glasgow presents. As discussed previously, in the early twentieth century, popular Southern literature, such as Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, was working to restore a mythologized era – that of the Southern belle, hospitality, pure blood, and wealth. However, desperate poverty, racial tension, and waning agrarianism was reality for the South. The Modern South was complexly conflicted. The many fates at play in Glasgow’s *Barren Ground* favor the complex South of reality over the idealized South of folklore. Likewise, the many characters add to the novel’s complexity (though the secondary characters are too often downplayed in the criticism, including the discussion at hand, to focus on the protagonist, Dorinda). The characters, all of them, exist in “the brooding spirit of place, but, deeper still, beneath the spirit of place there is the whole movement of life” (Glasgow viii). The setting of *Barren Ground* does make the novel distinctly Southern, but the characters, indeed the fates, are both distinctly Southern and universally human.

One such fate that lingers on the line between Southern and universal is heritage. To be sure, all humans are shaped by their heritages, but the particular heritage of the South has a unique impact on Dorinda. Only a few pages into the novel, Glasgow begins with the heritage of Pedlar’s Mill. The reader learns of the tenant farms and the families who inhabit them. Special attention is paid to the hereditary fates of Dorinda’s
parents, Joshua Oakley and Eudora Abernathy. Eudora Abernathy inherited the Presbyterian theology that her father, John Calvin Abernathy, brought to Pedlar’s Mill (8), and thus a religious heritage. Lisa Hollibaugh argues that Glasgow’s employment of Calvinism (among other forces) has a feminist agenda: “Glasgow offers a feminist alternative to the various forms of predestination – whether scientific, religious, or even literary – that have dictated the stories of women.” However, it seems that Calvinism is not only questioned in the novel to thwart masculine dominance, but to present a type of religious fate. Indeed, the theology of Calvinism emphasizes fate. Chapter III of the Westminster Confession, the classic 1646 expression of Calvinistic theological tradition, states: "By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death." Calvinism is highly focused on destiny. Its doctrine of double predestination places such a strong emphasis on God’s elect that, for Eudora Abernathy, her inherited religious identity creates a “suppressed religious mania” and a “Religious depression” (Glasgow 9, 30). Where Calvinism is, there also are felt the forces of fatalism. This fate is especially true for Eudora Abernathy.

Eudora marries contrary to her family’s will for her life; she “fell a victim to one of those natural instincts which Presbyterian theology has damned but never wholly exterminated” by marrying the “poor white,” Joshua Oakley (9). Joshua Oakley cannot move under the thumb of the social fate he inherits. Joshua is tethered by his social class and thus his economic heritage. The poor white was one of the lowest tiers of Southern economics after Reconstruction, and its reputation did not allow for progress

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1 Although not written by Calvin himself, the Westminster Confession comes from his theological tradition and strongly mirrors his theology.
up the social ladder. At the outset of the novel, the narrator explains the important class
distinction between “good family” versus “good people” in Pedlar’s Mill (5). Joshua
was far from “good family” in that he did not come from the upper class, though he was
among the “good people,” those that could be trusted and conducted themselves
ethically.

Another element of Joshua’s economic binding was to his work. Those in the
lower classes of Southern culture worked hard, though making a day’s living was
difficult, let alone changing one’s class status. Joshua’s fate is “that destiny which dogs
the footsteps of ineffectual spirits” (9). Joshua is described as a plodding horse that
spends, “All his life [as] a slave to the land, harnessed to the elemental forces,
struggling inarticulately against the blight of poverty and the barrenness of the soil”
(40). The ways of old farming, especially his refusal to rotate his crops, prevent him
from a fruitful harvest for his work. Nevertheless, he pursues his work, going back out
to plow again even after his crop has been destroyed. His work methods perpetuate and
cement his low social status. The drive within him to work like a horse despite his
unrefined farming techniques creates a fate for Joshua as a sun-hardened debtor of the
land.

Eudora and Joshua each suffer from hereditary fates forced upon them, religious
and classist respectively. Subsequently, Dorinda inherits the sum of her parents’ fate.
Glasgow bestows on Dorinda a mixture of double-edged inherited traits through which
to sort: the work ethic of her father and the passion of her mother. Young Dorinda only
feels trapped by her hereditary fate; she does not perceive the benefits of her parents’
blood. She wishes to escape from underneath the oppressive fates that she believes her parents did not fight, but rather to which they succumbed.

Two male characters that reveal other fates at play in the novel are Dr. Jason Greylock, and Nathan Pedlar. For Jason, fear immobilizes his best intentions; emotional timidity and the Southern code of conduct is fate. Jason’s fear of his father dictates his life’s course. He blurts out to Dorinda, “[My father] broke my spirit… When a fear like that gets into the nerves, it’s like a disease… He always gets his way with me. He’s thwarted everything I ever wanted to do as far back as I can remember” (92). Jason never wanted to study medicine or marry Geneva Ellgood, but he does so because in the face of fear, and with the pressure of the Southern code of conduct, he is spineless. Jason’s downward spiral and Dorinda’s eventual rise to purchase Five Oaks highlight Jason’s emasculation. Jason’s fate is also an example of the aforementioned courtly manner and code of conduct that dictated Southern behavior. Jason’s fate is not wholly fear, but is determined by an unwritten code of honor to which Jason is expected to, and does, comply.

Nathan Pedlar suffers the fate of humbleness and generosity. While those character traits are seemingly honorable, and not traits from which one would suffer, the extent with which Nathan possesses those traits and lacks others makes it easy to take advantage of his good nature. He marries Dorinda, but “After five years of marriage, Nathan was scarcely more than a superior hired man of the farm… It was his misfortune, perhaps, that by demanding nothing, he existed as an individual through generosity alone” (387). Nathan’s character is admirable, but is easily swept aside by
Dorinda’s powerful stride. Rather than admired, Nathan is pitied. His heroic, and literally monumental, death only furthers the reader’s pity for him.

In the cases of Jason and Nathan, Dorinda triumphs over men who possess character traits that make them weak. She buys Jason’s land and nurses him, dictates abstinence in her largely ignored marriage to Nathan, and does not grieve either death. These men highlight Dorinda’s strength. Linda Wagner-Martin mentions Glasgow’s feminist contributions to Modernism in her article, “Women Authors and the Roots of American Modernism.” Wagner-Martin explains, “[C]ulturally, interest in the New Woman and the continuing battle for women’s rights enhanced the reputation of women writers: a kind of gender pride influenced what women readers found, read, and enjoyed” (140). It is possible that gender pride in Glasgow led her to create not only a strong female, but males with fatal weaknesses. To further exalt the female, Glasgow lowered the prestige of the males. Wagner-Martin adds, “The aim of the serious woman writer was to escape being labeled “woman” or “feminine.” Thus, Glasgow promotes the woman through demoting the men in lieu of imagining a hyper-feminine or sexless heroine. For example, Dorinda has more than one atypical trait for a woman in the Modern South, most notably her land ownership, but she also nurtures the land with traditionally maternal tendencies. Another promotion of the feminine in the novel is in Dorinda choosing dairy farming. Dairy farming is wholly reliant on the relationship between females and offspring, and the unique milk product of the female body. *Barren Ground* suggests that gender can dictate a certain type of emotional fate for its characters.
Dorinda exemplifies the aforementioned fates, heredity and gender, though other characters, such as her parents and Nathan and Jason, are better examples of such fates. However, Dorinda’s own fate, in her case, her psychology, invites closer examination; Dorinda is the novel’s best example of psychological fate because the reader learns more of Dorinda’s internal monologue than that of any other character. It worth noting how Dorinda’s particular psychological traits lead Dorinda to a particular, inescapable fate.

First, Dorinda displays what Freud called neurotic anxiety and she copes through subconscious repression. Gerald Corey, a scholar of Counseling Psychology, defines neurotic anxiety as “the fear that the instincts will get out of hand and cause one to do something for which one will be punished” (59). Dorinda’s repressed sexuality flares up throughout the novel and it scares her: “In her buried life there were hours when the old discontent awoke with the autumn wind in the broomsedge. At such moments she would feel that life had cheated her, and she would long passionately for something bright and beautiful that she had missed” (Glasgow 352). But note that those feelings were in her buried life; she neurotically fears if she allowed herself to explore sexuality, the feelings would become overpowering. The symphony music in New York also sends her into a whirlwind of strange and unwanted emotion: “Pure sensation held and tortured her. She felt the music playing on her nerves… Down there, in the deep below the depths of her being, she felt it tearing her vitals. Down there, in the buried jungle” (239). Deep feelings make her anxious. Because of that anxiety, she avoids the passion-seeped experience of music, what Freud may have considered subconscious repression, an ego-defense mechanism (Corey 59).
Dorinda’s intention to not surrender to emotion may also be derived from an aversion to neurasthenia. According to The University of Virginia’s website for its historical exhibit, *Neurasthenia and the Culture of Nervous Exhaustion*,

The clinical and diagnostic profile for nervous exhaustion (neurasthenia) was first described in 1881 by George Miller Beard, M.D., an early neurologist and graduate of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of New York. Beard based his ideas on a theory of “nervous energy,” that is, the health and capability of the nervous system. If this energy was depleted or abused, the person fell into nervous exhaustion and its debilitating conditions.

Eudora is diagnosed with neurasthenia (Glasgow 283) and Glasgow herself was diagnosed with a classic case of female neurasthenia (Goodman 57). Dorinda’s psychological habits may be a reaction against the neurasthenic misdiagnosis. The novel ends with her again assuring John Abner, but mostly herself: “Oh, I’ve finished with all that” (Glasgow 526). Dorinda’s neurotic anxiety remains her fate, suppressing her emotions.

Secondly, a complimentary, though distinctively Jungian psychoanalysis of Dorinda emphasizes the middle age quest for meaning. While Freud focused on the formative first years of life, Jung was more apt to analyze middle age and the “part of the nature of humans… to be constantly developing, growing, and moving toward a balanced and complete level of development” (Corey 74). When Dorinda returns from New York and truly begins to find success on the farm, she no longer belongs to the child/adolescent camp. Through restoring the land to fertility as she stretches toward middle age, Dorinda is actualized. Dorinda’s neurotic anxiety, repressed sexuality, and
middle age quest for actualization all fatefully lead toward successful farming. With anxiety and sexuality kept at bay, Dorinda’s psychological coping mechanisms curb distractions that would prevent her from material victory.

Dorinda’s success on the farm solidifies that fate ultimately treats her kindly. To summarize, many fates surface in the novel: heredity, class, religion, gender, emotional disposition, and psychology. The characters can be read according to any of these fates; fates play out differently among each character, and so, Glasgow’s own conclusion, “Character is fate,” is perplexing because the character development is not linear, nor does it follow the prescription written by any one structure of gender, religion, psychology, etc. It is difficult to suggest that one character trait leads to one fate because the interplay between Glasgow’s characters is too complicated.

The fates, from hereditary to psychological, are works of nature in that they are related to the body. One’s gender, emotionality, heredity, and psychology are all manifestations of bodily dictates, of DNA. Fate being determined by nature connotes involuntary action. The complication of inserting this observation into Glasgow’s equation (“Character is fate”) is that humans (i.e., characters) are works of nature and humans connote human agency, voluntary action. Character (which is fate) is a matter of nature (the involuntary) and human agency (the voluntary).

Consider first the involuntary, fatalistic, natural forces, within the novel. As previously discussed, class is something one is born into and Southern economics at the turn of the twentieth century rarely permitted one to shift class status. According to Calvinism, salvation is predetermined and a person has no control over it. Gender is male or female and is determined in utero. However, the opposite argument can be
made for these fatalistic forces, that they are indeed voluntary and a matter of human agency. The American dream, and perhaps a train ride North, can change a person’s class if s/he is resourceful enough. A person’s religious belief is a matter of personal faith and can be altered accordingly. Gender is only a societal category and not a physical limitation. A person’s character traits are the determining factors of a person’s ability or inability to succeed. So what is character according to Glasgow? Voluntary or involuntary? Is fate fixed, inviolable, unchangeable, or might it be tampered with according to one’s thoughts and actions?

Dorinda equivocates on this very question of determinism throughout the novel. Early on, the young Dorinda filled with passion, apt to make mistakes, and privy to fortuitous accidents, says to Bob Ellgood, “No matter how hard you work it always comes back to the elements in the end. You can’t be sure of anything when you have to depend upon the elements for the living” (74). Decrepit Jason comments years later about his own alcoholism, “No, I don’t blame anybody. I don’t blame anybody for anything. Least of all myself. It was the way things turned out” (467). Bob and Jason both interpret their fates as having happened to them, involuntarily. But ultimately, young Dorinda grows into mature Dorinda whose philosophy on fate suggests more voluntary action. Shawn Miller puts Dorinda’s maturing view on life’s predictability this way: “Dorinda's trajectory is thus away from feeling trapped by things as they are toward welcoming the stability of those things because stability allows for better calculation” (96). The primary example in the novel is the once intelligent, progressive Jason reverts to a helpless, useless old man. So it seems Glasgow would want the reader
to believe that the involuntary outlook on fate, that nature’s will is unconnected with human agency, is immature and flawed.

The mature Dorinda reflects, “The difference [in her happiness] was that at twenty her happiness has depended upon love, and at fifty it depended upon nothing but herself and the land” (470). Two pages later, she is thinking about her marriages and how “it was too late to begin over again. Well, that was the way things happened in life!” (472). In the latter quotation, she slips into allowing involuntary nature to determine her life. Yet three pages later, she’s back to believing in her own agency in determining her fate: “The reckless courage that had started her on the dubious enterprise of her life had hardened at last into the fortitude with which she had triumphed over the unprofitable end of her adventure” (474 – 5). Dorinda appears to be the conqueror at the end of the novel and she knows it though she questions her victory’s worth. Just as she feels herself slipping into passionate feelings and suppresses it throughout her life, she suppresses the belief that her life is not hers to determine. She suppresses the idea that nature might have its way with her regardless of her own strivings.

So what is implied if we take Glasgow’s assertion at face value, and simply agree that fate is character? Is that all there is to the thematic thrust of the novel? Surely, fate is muddled and indeterminate. But Dorinda’s dairy farm success is definite. And so it seems that Dorinda’s oneness with nature is the key that allows her more latitude to play a role in her fate, to contribute an element of human agency. The other characters suffer from fate but Dorinda works with fate by working with nature. The botanical imagery in the novel is profuse and full of symbolism. It is impossible to exhaust a
discussion on Glasgow’s use of natural language, metaphor, and the use of land as character. Nature, throughout the novel, works with Dorinda. It reflects her emotions, and captures her attention. Reconsider a few brief examples of the nature so closely connected to Dorinda. In earlier chapters, the link between the land and Dorinda was analyzed, but now, that analysis will be synthesized in an attempt to understand the thematic thrust of the novel.

Even down to its structure, the novel links Dorinda’s life and choices to nature. The novel revolves around three forms of vegetation: broomsedge, pine, and life everlasting, each marking a period of Dorinda’s life. “Broomsedge,” as aforementioned, is a time of fiery passion, “Pine” is a time of hard work and learning, and “Life-Everlasting” is a time of resolution. The title of the novel refers to both the land and Dorinda’s barrenness. The link between Dorinda and nature is elemental to the story. Nature has its hold on Dorinda, on her body, and her choices. Nature ultimately allows Dorinda’s choices to take root and improve her life. Dorinda, more than the other characters, works with nature to restore it. Nature is not only a matter of physical labor and production for Dorinda, another reason she is more successful than the other characters. Dorinda’s relation to Aunt Mehitable Green suggests that Dorinda has an affinity for the spiritual aspect of nature.

Before analyzing the relationship between Dorinda and Aunt Mehitable Green, it is important to pause to briefly discuss the role of race in the novel. Black characters in the novel are tangential, almost part of the Southern scenery. One possible exception is Dorinda’s servant, Fluvanna. Fluvanna is Dorinda’s companion after Eudora dies and prior to Dorinda’s marriage to Nathan; her character matters at Old Farm. While
Fluvanna’s role is more than tangential, and an honest affinity exists between Fluvanna and Dorinda, there is still an obvious racial barrier between the women: “Fluvanna respected and adored her mistress; and Dorinda, with an inherited feeling of condescension, was sincerely attached to her servant” (Glasgow 349). Once Dorinda marries Nathan, Fluvanna’s character fades away, another example of the novel’s tangential attitude toward black characters.

Black characters are caricatured and mentioned in ways that are not only dismissive, but demeaning. Black servants such as Fluvanna and Jemima, the Greylock’s servant, are criticized for their speech patterns and supposed inherent laziness. The children born to the older Dr. Greylock and his black servants are criticized for their heritage, but Dr. Greylock is not criticized for his abominable behavior toward his servants and children. Another example of the racist treatment of black characters is when Dorinda returns from New York to work on the farm. She hires black laborers to assist her. One morning, as she is addressing her employees, Dorinda thinks to herself, “Yes, she knew them all [the black characters of Pedlar’s Mill]. Ever since she could remember they had been part of the country… Like her mother, [Dorinda] was endowed with an intuitive understanding of the negroes” (281). In the near century that has followed Barren Ground, the lack of racial awareness and sensitivity in Glasgow’s work, as exemplified above, has rightly excluded her from any helpful discussion on race and the South.

Just as Dorinda demonstrates a short-sighted understanding of the racial culture that surrounds her and her employees, Glasgow possessed the same short-sightedness. Goodman notes that Glasgow had a lack of self-knowledge regarding her own racial
prejudices. Her prejudice is noted especially in her “mammy myth” perception of Lizzie Jones, the nurse that cared for young Glasgow (Goodman 27). Glasgow remembered Lizzie fondly, especially their adventures to the local apothecary, but Glasgow would grow into adulthood thinking that the “mammy myth” made Glasgow a sympathizer with black culture, rather than a perpetuator of racism in American culture (15). Therefore, sadly, the only contribution *Barren Ground* makes to the discussion of race is another tragic example of how pervasive, perpetuated, and misunderstood racism was in the Modern South. Apart from that contribution, there is not much to be mentioned regarding race in the novel, other than making the reader aware of the ubiquitous, demeaning attitude the novel passively and blindly takes toward the issue.

With that understanding addressed, the discussion will return to the relationship with Aunt Mehitable Green and Dorinda and how Aunt Mehitable Green (while caricatured as a black conjure woman, in accordance with Glasgow’s general (dis)regard toward her black characters) is close to Dorinda and close to the natural world. Green, a practiced midwife, is present at the birth of Dorinda “which had been unusually difficult” (76) and continues to be a presence in Dorinda’s more fragile moments. Aunt Mehitable is in Nathan’s store when Dorinda buys the blue dress for Jason’s attention rather than the red cow for her family’s wellbeing. Dorinda runs to Mehitable on the fretful night after she learned of Jason’s marriage to Geneva and Green is possibly the only character in the novel in tune enough with the body to know that Dorinda is pregnant with Jason’s child. Mehitable tries to reassure Dorinda, “Befo’ de week’s up you is gwineter be mah’ed… en dar ain’t a livin’ soul but Aunt Mehitable gwineter know dat de chile wuz on de way sooner” (141). Also, it is Mehitable’s son,
Ebenezer, who provides much needed field help to Dorinda when she returns to make Old Farm profitable. Ebenezer understands the land and is thus instrumental in helping Dorinda restore it (281).

Mehitable is linked closely to nature, indeed she returns thanks for gifts “with slips of old-fashioned flowers or “physic” brewed from mysterious herbs in her garden” (77). Her character has a connection with nature beyond what is seen. Of course, her last name is Green which, in itself, suggests nature’s deeper way with her. Mehitable’s presence at critical moments in Dorinda’s life and Dorinda’s admiration of Mehitable’s “simple, profound, and elemental forces” (139) show that Dorinda is in tune with those who are well-tuned to nature, even though other characters think Mehitable’s natural methods are less than effective.

Another character whose opinion is sometimes discredited by the community, including Dorinda, is Matthew Fairlamb. However, in a prophetic conversation near the beginning of the novel, Matthew Fairlamb warns or perhaps assures Dorinda, “Broomsage ain’t just wild stuff. It’s a kind of fate” (4). In the novel, Dorinda learns the veracity of this statement. Examples of Glasgow’s plot manipulation by way of a series of accidents – the termination of her pregnancy and her introduction to the Faradays most notably – allow Dorinda to see the impact of nature on her success. A series of characters she meets allow her to see the impact of nature on people’s lives – from heredity to gender. In a scene wherein she learns of her mother’s religious nightmares and father’s hard, useless work, Dorinda reflects: “Yes, old Matthew was right. What the broomsedge caught, it never relinquished” (125).
While Dorinda sees more clearly that Matthew is right, she does not yet realize how true his mantra is for her. By the end of the novel a beautiful statement is made about Dorinda’s internalization of Matthew’s comments: “The spirit of the land was flowing into her, and her own spirit, strengthened and refreshed, was flowing out again toward life” (524). And upon feeling the reciprocity of herself and nature, she recalls Matthew’s words, “Put your heart in the land… The land is the only thing that will stay by you” (524).

It is because of the wise words and lifestyle of some of the least respected (Mehitable and Fairlamb) and close attention to the fates played out by some of her closest kin (her parents, Jason, and Nathan), that Dorinda leads a materially successful life. She is a conqueror over the land by working with the land. To return to the earlier metaphor, Dorinda is best able to captain the ship tossed by the seas of fate in Barren Ground. Glasgow does an impeccable job at complicating the impetus of fatalistic forces though secondary characters in her strivings toward literary realism. However, fate leads the reader to return ultimately any discussion of this novel to nature and Dorinda. Perhaps the most fitting conclusion is to suggest that Dorinda and fate are paradoxically powerless and victorious. Dorinda’s life is an example of fruitful futility.

The argument strung together over these chapters suggests that Dorinda’s fate lies at the intersection of the land and her body. However, that argument is only one small facet of the thematic depth encapsulated by the novel. To return to suggestions made the introductory chapter of this paper, contemporary literary criticism would do well to give more attention Barren Ground, Glasgow, and her other works. Specifically, Cultural Studies might study the Tidewater region using Glasgow’s letters as primary
sources that provide insight into the Modern South. Cultural Studies might also focus on the wealth divide, considering Glasgow’s financially comfortable lifestyle compared to the historical wealth divide and the fictional wealth divide Glasgow creates. Eco-criticism might give more attention to Glasgow’s land symbolism, not in the literary sense demonstrated in this paper, but in the agricultural sense, as a gateway toward understanding Southern trends in environmental resourcefulness.

Glasgow’s *Barren Ground* is richly flawed, no doubt, but it is also richly focused on a time and place that is unique to the American literary landscape. Contemporary literary lenses such as Cultural Studies and eco-criticism would be illumined by Glasgow’s work because it has marks of an author who both loves and loathes her Southern strengths and weaknesses, some of which she is aware and others of which she is unaware. Glasgow is an author emerging from that status quo toward progress. She is an opportunity for the literary critic to observe a shift in the literary depiction of the South as it hatches, rather than observing the more popular authors who depict the literary shift before or after its birth. With patience and close observation, contemporary literary spheres would be enlightened by the unique developmental stage Glasgow represents within the Modern South.
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Woodlot. Broomsedge in Winter, Stone County, Mississippi, USA. Photograph.  