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Women's Emancipation and the Return to Small-Town Life in Three Novels of the 1920s

Supervisor
Prof. Simone Francescato

Co-Supervisor
Prof. Mena Mitrano

Graduand
Camilla Bonato
Matriculation N. 870110

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Abstract

My thesis investigates Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street*, Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*, and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* focusing on the main characters' choice to return to their rural small-town villages after a period spent in a larger, urban context during the 1920s. The thesis explores the characters' choices underlying this return, examining the reasons behind their decisions and identifying both similarities and differences among the protagonists, Carol Kennicott, Dorinda Oakley, and Helga Crane.

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INTRODUCTION

My thesis analyzes three novels from the 1920s: *Main Street* (1920) by Sinclair Lewis, *Barren Ground* (1925) by Ellen Glasgow, and *Quicksand* (1928) by Nella Larsen. The focus of this analysis is the authors' choice to have their protagonists - Carol Kennicott, Dorinda Oakley, and Helga Crane, respectively - return to a rural small-town village after their experience in an urban social and cultural context, which offers greater cultural openness and opportunities than those offered in their original villages. The analysis attempts to identify correlations between historical and cultural events of the time, particularly regarding women's roles and emancipation, and their connection to the theme of returning to the small-town village. My thesis considers these texts within and without the development of regional literature in the 1920s, with a focus on characterization. In other words, it delves into the motivations behind the protagonists' departure from rural environments and explores the implications of this choice on their paths toward self-determination. Additionally, the thesis analyzes the protagonists' interpersonal relationships with other characters in the novels to understand how these interactions influenced their journeys toward emancipation. The analysis considers factors such as geographical origins, social status, and race in shaping their experiences. Key topics include the contrast between urban and rural realities, women's mobility within these contexts, opportunities for women's growth in both settings, women's familial roles, perceptions of black and mixed-race women in American society, possible shifts in gender roles, and the evolving depiction of women and village life in 1920s literature.

The motivations that prompted me to explore this issue are particularly related to my reading of *Main Street*. At the end of the book, I wondered what reasons had led Sinclair Lewis, an author

who was close to the feminist cause, to return his heroine to a small-town village, despite her initial eagerness to find opportunities in an urban environment. I wondered whether there were cultural dynamics that Lewis wanted to highlight regarding the role of women and their position in society. To test this hypothesis, I chose two other novels that would allow me to explore whether, in other cultural and literary currents as well, the theme of the return to the village was used as a tool to analyze the challenges of women in 1920s society. I wanted to explore this theme by dealing with protagonists from different cultural backgrounds: in *Barren Ground* a farm woman in the Southern countryside and in *Quicksand* a biracial middle-class woman in a segregated town of the South. Furthermore, analyzing novels written by both men and women allowed me to broaden the spectrum of analysis.

The analysis traces some milestones in the literary and cultural context of the 1920s, considering the Revolt Literature movement, the Southern Renaissance and the Harlem Renaissance. The aim of this thesis is to verify whether the return of the protagonists to the village could be a narratological choice dictated by a specific interpretation of the authors with respect to the possibilities of women's mobility and emancipation in 1920s society. It will be examined whether, despite the fact that they belonged to different literary currents, the works of Lewis, Glasgow and Larsen are influenced by the cultural-historical transformations that took place in the United States between the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, particularly in the 1920s, the period in which the works under analysis were published. For the purposes of this thesis, it is crucial to investigate how women within these communities navigate their lives, confronting the expectations imposed on them by rural society and the impact with urban society.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter introduces the historical, cultural and literary context of the authors examined, through a brief historical and social excursus on the main cultural events of the 1920s America. This part analyzes the changes in the perception of the return to the village as a literary theme in Revolt Literature, the change in the perception of the figure of the woman in Southern Renaissance literature compared to the previous literary tradition of the

plantation, and the difficulty in defining Black identity in the literary context of the Harlem Renaissance. In this initial part, the thesis will provide an overview of the position of women in society in both the Midwest and the Southern United States, analyzing the social and cultural limitations imposed on women.

The second chapter offers a reading of Sinclair Lewis's novel, *Main Street*, analyzing the contrasts between the traditionalist sentiments typical of the small-town village where the protagonist Carol Kennicott lives and the more progressive ideologies of the urban city of Washington D.C., highlighting how the protagonist reacts to these different cultural realities. In the second part of the chapter, we will see how these contrasts influence the identity of the protagonist with respect to her role as woman, mother and wife. The third chapter focuses on Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground*, analyzing her representation of the South through the female protagonist, Dorinda Oakley, who is the pivot of Glasgow's reinterpretation of Southern female identity. In this chapter, we will see how Glasgow places the female figure in a context like the South, where progress always struggles to take root. In the fourth and final chapter, the analysis focuses on the problems related to the biracial identity of Helga Crane, the protagonist of Nella Larsen's novel, *Quicksand*. This chapter will highlight the difficulties of integrating the protagonist in a society that is not reassuring with regard to the possibilities offered to black women, establishing the cultural and social premises of her decision to return to a Southern country. In the last part of the chapter, we will see how social prejudices about her race, based on ideologies rooted in the legacy of slavery, influence the novel's ending. In the concluding section, I will attempt, where possible, to explain the significance of the protagonists' return to the small-town village, highlighting any similarities or differences in the authors' narrative choices. I will consider the differences among the female protagonists, such as social class, the geographical context of their movements, and race. These final considerations will aim to determine whether the return to the village for the female protagonists can be interpreted in different ways.

CHAPTER ONE

SMALL-TOWN LITERATURE AND ITS CONTEXT

1.1 Shifting Perspectives on the Small-Town Myth and on Women's Relation to Small-town Life

The first three decades of the 20th century were a period characterized by significant changes from a cultural, social and literary point of view. Among the most important events occurring during this time frame are events that highlight the contrast between rural America and industrial America. As Thomas G. Reeves observes in *Twentieth-Century America: A Brief History* (2000), the transition from the 19th and the 20th century was marked, on the one hand, by "unprecedented wealth, industrial output, and mass production" (Reeves 83), a prosperity that was not evenly distributed and led to simmering tensions, labor strikes, and the Great Migration of Black Americans seeking opportunities in urban centers, alongside systemic exclusion and the scourge of lynchings, which increased between 1882 and 1950 especially in the South (Reeves 16). The 1920s, in particular, were a dichotomous era, characterized by both sexual freedom and cultural outbursts, epitomized by the Jazz Age, and the rise of prohibitionism and puritanical impositions against immigrant Catholics and their evolving morality, especially in the South and Midwest. The era also saw the rise of consumerism and urbanization, sparking a clash between the traditional ethos of small-town villages and the allure of modern city life. This clash between modern cities and conformist countryside intensified, giving rise to new fundamentalisms, including the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, whose targets expanded to include Jews, Catholics, immigrants, liberals, intellectuals, and advocates of the "new urban morality" (Reeves 93).

The advent of modernization not only marked the centralization of industrial America over rural America, but also a departure from the traditional and puritan small-town values of the 19th and early 20th centuries to those of the more urban, industrial and technological America. This socio-cultural landscape may have prompted several American literary luminaries writing at the turn of the century to question the conflicting aspects of American society, emerging as vocal critics of the Modern Age. From a literary perspective, a vibrant cultural renaissance emerged during this period, exemplified by movements such as the New York Little Renaissance in 1908; intellectuals like Van Wyck Brooks, Pound, and Mencken critiqued American Modernism, fostering a "negative vision of American culture" (Mansanti 2). This perspective influenced authors of the 1920s and 1930s, including Sinclair Lewis, Ellen Glasgow, and Nella Larsen, who aligned with various regionalist movements. Indeed, in the backdrop of political strife and cultural ferment, the literary landscape of the 1920s emerged as a battleground of ideas, where authors navigated the tensions between tradition and progress, conformity and dissent, in a nation at the crossroads of its identity. During the first decades of the 20th century, a new outburst of "national" writing took place in American literary landscape. This kind of writing not only challenged various facets of American society but also introduced fresh perspectives on the complexities of modern life, with writers engaging with the multifaceted landscape of American reality and attempting to resolve its complexities. Among the literary movements that grappled with the nature of America's new national identity were the Southern Renaissance, the Harlem Renaissance, the "new regionalism", and other folklore and regionalist movements (Lutz 99). Within this prolific literary context, regional cultural production was an essential force in sustaining a pluralistic society and the preservation of the American past. Many regionalists from different literary currents saw regionalism as a space where to keep the very essence of American cultural history in a vast, diverse and changing country. Indeed, regional writers of local color worked to preserve cultural elements in collective memory, since its existence was in danger because of the rise of industrialization and capitalism; in one word, modernity. Robert L. Dorman elaborates on what the advent of modernity for regionalist writers meant. Dorman argues

that regionalists tended to believe that their particular region embodied "timeless political principles, universalistic philosophical truths, even irrational mystical beliefs" (11). Moreover, according to Dorman, phenomena such as industrial modernization, capitalism, mass culture, united with the interwar period's resurgence of '100 percent Americanism' and prohibitionism, were "setting the context for the homogenized caricature of community life that artists and intellectuals like Lewis found so oppressive in the 1920s" (19). As Dorman puts it, such historical and social phenomena occurring in the interwar period, were threatening the heterogeneity of culture that regionalist writers were necessarily prompted to preserve. Writer and critic Tom Lutz seems to align with Dorman's perspective, as he explains in *Cosmopolitan Vistas: American regionalism and literary value* (2004) that "industrial civilization was homogenizing and destroying culture" (101), sustaining that the nation's core ideals could only endure in areas "as insulated as possible from the world of machines and their money" (101). It is evident that American culture experienced a significant transformation during this era, shifting away from its rural, frontier origins characterized by farming and village life towards a contemporary, consumer-driven, and mechanized society that revolved around vibrant and diverse urban centers. Such a profound metamorphosis couldn't but have an influence on the perception of American society, which is exactly what was at stake in the literary trends explored in this thesis.

Clarifying the notion of modernity is crucial as it helps understand the extent to which certain regionalist authors of the beginning of the 20th century rebelled against industrialized America, contrasting it with their often nostalgic and idealized portrayal of rural America. This nostalgic representation, which was deemed - quoting Dorman - "oppressive" and obsolete by authors like Sinclair Lewis, no longer seemed to resonate with the evolving reality. Lewis and others endeavored to distance themselves from prior local color literature by challenging the myth of the idyllic village life. Several leading figures of a whole generation of writers such as Harold Stearns, Lewis Mumford, Theodore Dreiser, Eugene O'Neill, Willa Cather, H.L. Mencken, Sherwood Anderson, Upton

Sinclair, and Sinclair Lewis (Mansanti 2) joined in criticizing the homogenization of life in America and promoting a reconsideration of American identity through a new literary language. This quest for a new representation of national identity was undertaken by certain authors through a critique of traditional American values, still inherent in small rural villages.

In 1921, in the literary periodical the *Nation*, critic Charles Van Doren argued that certain American novelists were attacking the myth of the "happy Village", emphasizing its "moral repressiveness and stultifying conformity, and protesting its standardized dullness" (Hilfer 3). The critic identified this anti-conformist spirit primarily on the "Revolt from the Village" writers (Van Doren qtd. in Hilfer 3), including in this category writers such as Masters, Anderson, Cather, and Lewis. Van Doren stressed that these authors were "equally concerned with deadening standardization, but instead of seeing traditional, rural culture as an antidote to urban alienation, these novelists saw it as the seedbed of conformity" (Lutz 104) and were working to "dispel the myth of the village as the protector of traditional healthy values" (Lutz 104). In other words, Revolt Literature novelists were attempting to debunk the tradition of the village myth: it was no longer to represent a bucolic place where the purest aspects of American culture still resided, but the failure to find an alternative to the alienating reality of industrialized America. What is important to point out is that Van Doren's theory proved to be only partially true, since these authors "both rejected the promise of modernity and the 'cult of the village' as redress" (Lutz 104). This means that the critic was right to consider these authors as revolting against the Village, considering the satire employed in the works of authors such as Lewis and the overall critique of conformism and stultified life in the village, but what Van Doren was probably not taking into account was the discontent of the lost generation and their partial rejection of modernity. This is clear if we think of authors such as Sherwood Anderson, who despite rejecting the village as an idyllic place where to escape from industrial America, nevertheless "cast a jaundiced eye on the city and industrialization as he understood these phenomena as partly responsible for modern man's emotional numbness, a paralysis that made it difficult for one

to feel a part of other men's lives, to love, indeed to experience community" (Goist 23). It thus appears that the view of American society held by writers of Revolt Literature may have been ambivalent. They did not praise the city at the expense of the village; as Lutz points out, the texts of the authors of Revolt Literature are congenial to the regionalist movements of the time, since, thanks to their ambivalent character in relation to the village, "they strip the village of its myths while decrying modern standardization and alienation, and celebrate the primitive while demonstrating the value of civilization" (106). This ambivalent tendency demonstrates that authors of Revolt Literature aimed to disprove the village myth while maintaining skepticism toward the urban environment as a refuge. Lutz also contends that "Van Doren […] was wrong to see these authors as revolting against a tradition of idyllic pastoral. They were simply revolting […] against the exclusions, the 'gaps' in the storytelling that had preceded them" (123). In saying that, Lutz affirms that authors were not rebelling against the village itself in its conformity, but rather "against subliterary representations of village life" (123). The critique of the village, or more precisely, its representation, thus seeks to challenge the reader's or American civilization's perception of itself. So, what Van Doren perhaps ignored was that the literary authors did not necessarily want to criticize in a direct and one-sided way the narrow-mindedness of the Midwest villages, as opposed to modern America; instead, they wanted to criticize the authors' portrayal of the Village before them, making it, through a narrative that was too sweetened compared to the complexity of reality, a real myth. Channel Hilfer's work in *The Revolt from the Village: 1915-1933* (1969), seems to support this perspective. Hilfer deems that the village was essentially a literary expedient to both represent and put into question American civilization:

> "The village was synecdoche and metaphor. The village represented what Americans thought they were, what they sometimes pretended (to themselves as well as others) they wanted to be, and if the small town was typically American, the Midwestern small town was doubly typical. […] Thus the Midwestern novelists of the teens and twenties could see their locale as a microcosm of the nation and, provincial bourgeoises that they were, of the world. But their view was critical. The town was the focus of what was in actuality an over-all attack on middle-class American civilization." (4)

This is to say that the village myth was constructed as an “escape” (Hilfer 5) from the complexities and constant changes of a society that was moving from a rural structure to a more industrialized reality, and the myth served to counteract industrialized America. It was essentially the antithesis of modernity. Considering this last insightful analysis and the demonstration of shifting perspectives on the myth of small-town and rural life presented above, it can be argued that the village functioned as a mirror, revealing that it was no longer a refuge from society’s pressures, but, rather, it embodied the very problems within society itself. The village came to represent Americans’ self-perception, with all its hypocrisies accentuated against the backdrop of advancing industrialization. Thus, authors of the “revolt” aimed to critique the conformity found in rural communities through a satirical prose, while offering readers a fresh perspective that challenged the outdated principles of “old America” in light of the modernized culture and society of the times. Urbanized American society, however, for all the aforementioned authors represented an additional threat juxtaposed with the hypocrisy of the village, the resolution of which appears to lie necessarily in their coexistence.

The ambivalence in the critique of small-town life prompts reflection on whether characters in these narratives also hold ambivalence toward both village and urban life. Since the protagonists of the three novels analyzed in this thesis are women, it would be useful to provide an overview of women's lives during the Twenties and examine whether and how this ambivalent relationship is portrayed in literature. In the years following the women's suffrage amendment, there was a notable resurgence of a cultural interest in redefining the image and role of women within American society. Maureen Honey makes a reflection on an account of American periodical fiction stories of the period, which testify to this renewed interest in providing an alternative to the role traditionally imposed on women.[1] These stories depict the characteristics of the “New Woman”, who challenges traditional gender norms by rebelling against societal expectations imposed upon women, such as “parental

[1] It is right to specify that although this thesis focuses on the literary novel rather than periodicals, such stories can be valuable in comprehending the evolving perceptions of women's roles at the time, especially given that the fiction stories Maureen Honey analyses addressed female audiences (26).

constraints, marriage, domesticity, and family tradition" (Honey 25). The narratives present the "New Woman" as seeking individual freedom, new work roles, and equal access to opportunities previously reserved for men. This rebellion often leads the female characters of these periodicals to urban settings, symbolizing a departure from rural life and traditional values. Furthermore, the emergence of female heroines in these works targeted white, middle-class female audiences (26), suggesting that these notions of anti-conformism might reflect shifting ideals in American culture at the time. However, these new progressive scenarios for women, or "fantasies" (26) as defined by Honey, reveal inherent dualities within the female heroine. According to Honey:

> "These fantasies furnish insight into attitudes that coalesced at this time. Specifically, they mediated two contradictory impulses evident in popular culture: the desire to assimilate into the modern world and to flee from it, the rejection of a separate sphere for women and the fear of losing human connections when leaving that sphere. We are given a complex portrait of characters in flight from domesticity and eager to conquer new territory, but also experiencing losses of community, humane values and affectional ties with other women." (26)

Honey underlines that the attempts to revise gender roles were torn between two different impulses, an ambivalence that aptly mirrors the confusion of mass culture accompanying modernity during the transition from rural to urban society. In some of the 1920s stories that echo the cultural sentiments of the era, the escape from a small village is a central theme. It's conceivable that this renewed emphasis on women's roles may have influenced how women are portrayed in literature with regards to rural life and gender limitations. Indeed, women in the '20s faced unyielding communities, resistant to change despite progressive ideals. Rebellion against tradition, defiance of family, and abandonment of sedentary life for urban freedom, therefore, may emerge as key literary themes. This observation holds particularly true when considering, for example, Revolt Literature narratives and the backdrop of the clash between rural and urban America; the typical "revolt-from-the-village" plot in the early 20th century often depicts the hero or heroine fleeing the small town, where they feel like a "misfit", for the "happiness of the eastern city" (Orvell 91). Essentially, certain regionalist authors,

similarly to the female writers of the periodical fiction stories analyzed by Maureen Honey, depict the tension between urban and rural settings through the protagonist's quest for a better future in urban spaces. Other literary works of the time, however, seem to represent the relationship between women and rural life differently. Carol Fairbanks collects the work of American and Canadian women writers, including Willa Cather, a precursor of Sinclair Lewis, who lived on the prairies for a long time and wrote about frontier women and their decisions to remain in the village.[2] Fairbanks offers insights into the role of these female protagonists on the frontier, describing their exploits and explaining their choice to remain in the village. The emergence of the frontierswoman as a literary figure reflects women's rebellion against societal norms and their desire for equality alongside men. However, women writers' representation of this dynamic seems to grapple, for Fairbanks, with a dual-sided tendency to represent both the "powerful agrarian ideal and the equally strong belief in progress" (184). Nevertheless, in many of the texts she mentions townspeople reveal "pervasive cultural isolation" (187), reflecting "conformity, prejudice, artificiality, habitual materialism, and what Cather calls 'respect for respectability'" (189). Fairbanks also illustrates how in Willa Cather's works women suffered from "narrow-mindedness of townspeople" (205), showcasing rebellion against gender norms. This however does not seem to reveal a clear-cut position; according to Fairbanks, female characters' responses to the village vary in the literature of the frontierswoman, especially in Cather's works. For instance, in "My Ántonia", Ántonia struggles with traditional womanhood, while also facing inadequacy in the village environment. Prairie women like Ántonia are portrayed by the women writers Fairbanks mentions as embodying the archetype of the 'Prairie Victim', depicting female characters who struggle to adapt to the harsh frontier environment. In essence, the representation of women in periodicals and literature of the early 20th century and its connection to the portrayal of the village myth highlight significant ambivalences, reflecting broader societal shifts. Moreover, in examining the depiction of village women in literature from the Revolt Literature

[2] While the novels I will analyze in this thesis do not unfold on the frontier, understanding the frontierswoman's role in these works may reveal shared elements with later writers, such as Sinclair Lewis.

period, it becomes apparent that their portrayal carries complexities mirroring those found in the portrayal of women's life in other cultural products of the period. Authors like Willa Cather grappled with portraying women in rural settings, shaping subsequent literary trends such as those of authors writing about the Midwest, like Sinclair Lewis with *Main Street* (1920), in which this representation is revised and modified, to create a new language. Ann Barnard's analysis in her essay "A North American Connection: Women in Prairie Novels" (1994) sheds light on the influence of Cather's work on later regionalist authors, particularly regarding gender dynamics and spatial mobility. Ann Barnard points out how authors like Cather may have influenced Sinclair Lewis and other regionalist authors in terms of creating a mainstream literature on the archetype of mobility and spatiality related to gender relations. Indeed, the depiction of female characters in works like *Main Street* (1920) reflects a thematic exploration of gender relationships concerned with "spatial archetypes involving motion and diversity" (Barnard 26) within rural communities. This means that these kinds of narratives challenge traditional patriarchal power structures and societal norms, illustrating the tension between female agency and the constraints of rural life. This occurs because, according to Barnard, the female figure seems to need to expand her spaces and the male figure acquires a secondary role ("This centering of the female character, which places the male character in the position of other, distances the reader from the patriarch and allows new territory for interpretation of both genders" 27). In this sense, the prairie setting, or the small country village, gains fundamental significance considering this thesis's objective, which is to elucidate the nature of the relationship between the female character and the village, particularly upon their return. Ann Barnard can help us resolve this last issue through her reflection on the rural environment. For Barnard, this environment symbolizes both "the nurturing earth mother" and "male power and distance" (25) for women. This seems to be true if we think of the fact that in the 20th century, women in prairie regions faced daily reminders of space as a hurdle to conquer or endure, reflected in literature as the "feminine search-conquest of space" (Barnard 25). Indeed, authors like Sinclair Lewis depicted Midwest village life as a place steeped in old American values; as noted by Andrew R. L. Cayton and Susan E. Gray, the dominant image of small-town

villages in the early 20th century was one of "stifling, bourgeois small-town conformity" (2). Within the rural village reality women encounter traditional and conformist norms, including patriarchal power dynamics, the prescribed roles of wife and mother, biases against diversity and change, and restrictive moral standards rooted in Puritanism - challenges that authors like Lewis and other writers of the Revolt Literature aim to confront. Consequently, the portrayal of women within the small-town myth may serve as a vehicle for scrutinizing the limitations of rural mentality.

This broader literary perspective not only enables us to grasp the evolving landscape of America beyond urban centers, but also prompts the analysis of the cultural background regarding Midwestern rural women's social position in the first half of the twentieth century.[3] During the late 19th century, the rural Midwest experienced significant changes as the clash between the traditional rural lifestyle and the emerging urban and technological advancements intensified. The technological and urban America of that period was beginning to clash with the old rural America, still permeated by a certain social rigidity, thus generating a strong cultural conflict. This cultural conflict was exacerbated, according to James H. Shideler, by factors such as the migration of young women from farms to cities, seeking new opportunities and experiences ("The move from the farm to the city involved mostly young people, particularly young women, one of whom declared, 'You meet such interesting people in the city.'" Shideler 291). The transformation of women's roles in the Midwest became evident during the early 20th century, spurred by technological advancements, industrialization, modernity, and burgeoning feminist movements. Initially confined to household and family management, women increasingly engaged in agricultural production and pursued political

[3] The sources for this evaluation primarily focus on the role of women in rural settings during the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, rather than in small middle-class villages. Despite the distinctions between these environments, these sources offer valuable insights into the shifting role of women in non-urban, decentered parts of the country. While our focus lies on the lives of middle-class women in small villages, as depicted in works like *Main Street* (1920) we also recognize the importance of understanding the dynamics of farm households, as portrayed in Ellen Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1925), keeping in mind that the latter is set in Virginia.

interests, facilitated by various women's organizations (Ziegler 78-79). Historical sources also show how the role of women in the Midwest changed during the first three decades of the 20th century. Initially, before the early 1920s, women on Midwestern farms focused primarily on household and family management, rather than on their contribution to agricultural production. For instance, initiatives like Roosevelt's Commission on Country Life in 1908 aimed to recognize the contributions of farm women to family farms, in relation to “childcare and household management”, stressing however their role “in the home rather than in the production” (Kleinschmidt 114). However, Edith M. Ziegler argues that women played a more integral role, often functioning as “co-producers” (82) rather than mere dependents, they were not “farm women” but “women farmers” (81), challenging traditional gender roles. The contrast between the conception of women in urban and rural settings may have contributed to enhancing the interest of the authors chosen for this thesis in writing about female protagonists’ mobility between rural and urban environments. The importance of understanding the dynamics of farm households is crucial as it sheds light on the changing societal norms outside urban environments, where the influence of gender roles faced significant challenges. Within this context, Mary Neth’s research emphasizes the importance of patriarchal household dynamics in shaping “the nature of farm labor and the organization of the agricultural economy” (565). Neth highlights how farm women's diverse attitudes towards their work challenge urban ideals of womanhood, suggesting a need for a reevaluation of prevailing notions of femininity. As the critic points out, “examining not only the sexual division of labor but also the ways in which farm women evaluated their work leads to reconsiderations of some important issues in women's history”, such as the “diversity of attitudes toward the various types of jobs they performed on the farm, and many farm women possessed an alternative vision of womanhood to that of the ‘leisured’ and ‘refined’ urban ideals” (564). Indeed, it seems that despite the emergence of progressive ideals and a consequent change in the structure of the rural family, some women in the farm environment considered their work enjoyable and not imposed by a patriarchal hierarchy. According to Mary Neth's studies of some Iowa farm women, many of them viewed their labors as a pleasure rather than

as a necessity, as they chose it (569). Neth also suggests that "the existence of these alternative models of "womanhood" need to be examined more completely and should lead to a reconsideration of the complete hegemony of middle-class urban ideals of womanhood" (565). The examination of women's roles in both the South and the Midwest during the early 20th century reveals significant changes in the perception of womanhood within family structures. These changes not only reflect the impact of progressive women's movements but also underscore the influence of factors such as social class and ethnicity on the effectiveness of these transformations.

In conclusion, the exploration of the historical, literary, and cultural landscape during the interwar period in America reveals a multifaceted cultural and social milieu characterized by significant upheavals and conflicting forces. The narrative strategy of most regionalist movements of the early 20th century reflects broader historical changes and societal tensions of the time, underscoring the ambivalence towards traditional values and the encroachment of modernity. In this literary context, the portrayal of women within the rural landscape served as a lens through which to examine the limitations and hypocrisies of traditional values, revealing tensions between individual agency and societal constraints. This theme, which we will analyze more closely in the exploration of the three novels, will not only help elucidate the decision to depart from the village but, considering the ambivalence inherent in these literary trends, also shed light on the return of the female protagonists to the rural environment.

1.2 The Representation of Southern Women and African American Women in the Plantation Tradition and Midwestern Rural Women's Changing Social Position

We have observed that during the transition from a rural to an industrialized society, alongside the emergence of modern, progressive ideals, there was a significant cultural and literary fascination

with the role of women in rural settings. This interest was particularly evident within the genre of local color fiction, as exemplified by the Revolt Literature in the Midwest in the 1920s, where the rejection of the village myth and the escalating tension between urban and rural environments became apparent. For my thesis, it is imperative to investigate whether a similar literary renaissance occurred in the South, as the latter provides the setting for two of the novels analyzed in this study. After the Civil War and during the Progressive Era at the turn of the century, the South confronted a radical transformation, namely the abolition of slavery as a social system and a shift towards capitalist and industrial ideals prevalent in the North. This profound change elicited a cultural response that was distinguished itself for its conservatism (Fox-Genovese 65) and was characterized by a reluctance to embrace the new ideals of progressivism, capitalism and individualism accompanying modern industrialization. According to James Shideler, in the South, "Prohibition enforcement, immigration restriction, the Ku Klux Klan, [and] anti-evolution laws" (293) served as outlets for frustrations and resentments, reflecting a complex interplay of rural-urban tensions akin to those observed in the Midwest. Walter Lippmann also suggested that during the 1920s prohibition, fundamentalism, the Ku Klux Klan, and xenophobia represented authentic expressions of the politics, social outlook, and religion of an older American village civilization resisting what it was perceived as an "alien invasion" (Lippmann qtd. in Eagle 29). Lippmann identifies this "alien invasion" with the "new Americans produced by the growth and prosperity of America", namely in the new urban civilization with its economic and scientific mass power (qtd. in Eagle 30). Lippmann underscores the significance of these phenomena, highlighting a profound "conflict between urban America and the countryside" (Lippmann qtd. in Eagle 29), which he sees as emblematic of the clash between new progressive ideals and traditional rural values. These tensions illuminate a broader conflict between the progressive ideals of industrialized America and the traditional values of the rural South, potentially shaping the responses of Southern writers to the societal changes unfolding at the turn of the century. Just as in the literary landscape of the Midwest, with its regionalist movements, this period experienced a strong tension between urban and rural realities. In the South, this tension was

compounded by complex racial, social, and economic dynamics, which inevitably influenced its culture and literary production. In the 20th century, the Southern writer had to grapple with the weight of tradition and a new consciousness of identity. According to Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, recalling Allen Tate's vision, in "The Anxiety of History: The Southern Confrontation with Modernity" (1993), the southern consciousness of its history, and therefore culture and literature, "resulted from a struggle between the forces of traditionalism and those of modernism" (Fox-Genovese 68), which had challenged the South since the end of the Civil War. These conflicts influenced the literary landscape of the South, as authors worked to preserve the antebellum tradition that envisioned the social structure of slavery, which characterized the region until its abolition. This structure provided for a hierarchy in which hegemony belonged to the man, who saw the woman as a subordinate, along with the plantation slaves. This struggle between tradition and modernity is evident in the conflict between the "Old South" and the "New South," as well as the "Old America," the rural side of the country, and the "New America," the industrialized part of the country. In an attempt to counteract the changes brought by the abolition of slavery, during the last decades of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, writers of Southern literature started to nostalgically idealize the prewar period in their works. This literary tendency is represented by the so-called "plantation tradition": it focused on an imaginative past characterized by harmony between slave owners and blacks, evoking a nostalgic view of the South. As described by Washington University Press, the plantation tradition "applies to works that look back nostalgically to the times before the Civil War, before the 'Lost Cause' of the Southern Confederacy was lost, as a time when an idealized, well-ordered agrarian world and its people held certain values in common" (Campbell). Thomas Nelson Page, a prominent literary figure of this tradition, exemplified the tendency to portray the "Old South" as a sanitized reality, retreating into an "idealized childhood" (Martin 19). Page wrote during the late 19th century about a New South that evoked the image of the South as one big plantation, a virgin land, an antebellum idyllic place where blacks and white slave owners lived in harmony. However, he did not completely dismiss the truth of modernity in the New South, indulging in elements of fantasy in his descriptions (Martin 19).

In this sense, Page favored an "Old South" but acknowledged the truth of modernity by mentioning the advantages of urban areas. This means that "Page manage[d] a double vision that allow[ed] him to cheer for bigger cities while envisioning the return of a pastoral ideal, to mourn a way of life as lost forever yet see it as reborn" (Martin 20). This dualistic vision of the plantation tradition, which sees authors like Thomas Nelson Page grieving a lost way of life while envisioning its rebirth, underscores the complexities of Southern identity in transition. Indeed, as Barbara C. Ewell points out in "Women, the Old South; or, What Happens When Local Color Becomes Regionalism" (1997), "the South's refusal (or inability) to participate in the nation's determined progress toward modern capitalism" in the late 19th and early 20th centuries "was closely paralleled and supported by its narrative reconstruction", as literature provided spaces for reaffirming traditional social attitudes. Local color fiction in the South seems therefore to have served, in this sense, as a realistic response to profound economic and social conflict. In particular, the vision of the "Old South" also encompassed a sanitized representation of the relationship between masters and black slaves, as well as the depiction of women. On the one hand, stories often portrayed African Americans as happier and better off under slavery, perpetuating the racist stereotype of the "happy darky" (Martin, 19). On the other hand, in the household context, the Southern woman was epitomized by the "Southern Belle" (McHaney 2), whose primary role was to embody Southern beauty and submit to her husband, albeit in a superior position to blacks. An example of the "Southern Belle" can be seen in literature through the character of Scarlett O'Hara in Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone With the Wind* (1930) who perfectly embodies the stereotype of the "corrupted Southern belle" (Harrison 64). This idealized thus unrealistic portrayal of women reflected inherent contradictions in the Southern cultural definition, where women were expected to be "beautiful, gentle, efficient, morally superior", yet simultaneously "submissive to male authority" (Scott 299). The plantation tradition in Southern literature served indeed as a means to cope with the profound changes brought by the abolition of slavery and the advent of modernity. This literary movement nostalgically idealized the prewar South

while grappling with the realities of a transforming society, reflecting the tensions and complexities of Southern identity during this transitional period.

During the first three decades of the 20th century, a number of authors started to revise the plantation tradition, being influenced by the new urban-rural contrasts and a new vision of the role of women influenced by the suffragist movement. This revision also includes different perspectives on blacks from black authors. This revision of the plantation tradition started with authors such as Charles W. Chesnutt at the turn of the century. Chesnutt was the forerunner of authors like Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen, who offered new visions of black women in literature. He was the greatest opponent to the plantation tradition and Page's narrative. Before the beginning of the 20th century, Chesnutt wrote texts that foregrounded blacks, in sharp contrast to Page's literature. He is known for being the "subverter" of the plantation myth, attempting to "elevate" (Martin 21) his audience while offering a slight critique of the plantation tradition's representation of blacks, but still maintaining the same idyllic setting. In "The Plantation Tales of Thomas Nelson Page and Charles W. Chesnutt" (1998) Matthew R. Martin explains that Charles W. Chesnutt is significant in the history of black literature because he:

> "undertook the difficult task of conquering the literary marketplace by selling plantation tales which refused his readers the expected pleasures of paradisiacal settings or happy slaves. At the same time, he used a literary form whose appeal lay almost wholly in its romanticization of slavery and the plantation South as a means of revising public perceptions about those institutions" (26).

In this sense, Page and Chesnutt stand on opposite sides (Martin, 18): while Page promotes the plantation tradition, Chesnutt subverts it. However, both attempt to reconcile tradition with the reality of the New South.

In the 1920s, the historical destabilization of the South after the Civil War and throughout the turn of the century prompted various regionalist movements to respond to the conflict between urban industrialization and traditional values and identity. These movements embodied "preservationist,

reactionary, and progressive elements" (Lutz 106) while maintaining elements of tradition in their works, like those seen in the writings of Page and Chesnutt, despite their opposing views on the ideal social order. The efforts of Southern regionalism sought to preserve the literary value of rural life, partially through maintaining the plantation tradition, especially in the depiction of female characters. As Pearl Amelia McHaney points out, early representations of white women in Southern literature were often stereotyped as "Southern Belles" and "ladies", and black women as "mammies" and "mulattoes" (1-2). Moreover, according to McHaney, because Southern society, and by extension its literature, was predominantly white and male, "women of color and those not enmeshed in the myths of the war or the Lost Cause were largely ignored" (1). Indeed, the "other" figures of the white woman, the Southern Belle, and the black woman, the "mammy" or "mulatto," were previously marginalized but were revised during the Southern Renaissance. Barbara Bennett, as quoted in McHaney, explains that authors like Ellen Glasgow, Frances Newman, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, and William Faulkner used the belle in their literature to represent the "darker side of the South, symbolizing traditions of the Old South crumbling in the face of modern life" (6). In the plantation tradition, the white woman was typically represented by the "Southern Belle" or "Southern Lady," an image that, according to Anne Firor Scott, was still "very much alive in the 1920s" (301). The Southern Lady was an image that embodied external components such as "beauty, gentleness and winning ways" and behavioral qualities such as "modesty, domesticity, chastity, and submission to male opinions" (301). Essentially, her sole purpose was to depend on her husband and be beautiful, representing the essence of the South. In the first decades of the 20th century, Southern Renaissance authors such as Ellen Glasgow, attempted to produce an image of the Southern woman as independent, albeit bound by traditions. These authors focused on young women who rebelled against conventional Southern expectations, sought careers, and desired more than just beauty and marriage ("They rebel against the conventional Southern expectation that they must marry and the precept that if a woman is beautiful that is enough. They are often disillusioned with Southern men and desire careers that develop their individual skills and expand their sense of competence", Seidel 290).

Another recurrent image in Southern literature was the “mulatto” or “tragic mulatto” woman, which authors like Nella Larsen sought to redefine during the 1920s. The “Tragic Mulatto” represented mixed-race or biracial African Americans “moving between black and white communities” (Gray 259). This figure was problematic due to its roots in miscegenation and the sociological and racial tensions in the United States. Specifically, the mulatto is an African American with an “obvious admixture of white blood" (Bullock 78), but from a sociological perspective, this figure represented a social and racial problem in the United States, as a “cultural hybrid” or a “stranded personality living in the margin fixed status” (Bullock 78). Authors like Nelson Page depicted the mulatto as a “dangerous element among the freedmen” (Bullock 79), reflecting antisemitic perceptions. Later, Chesnutt’s portrayal of the mulatto ended on a redemptive note, offering hope for a promising characterization in 20th century literature by attempting to reconcile black identity with the American Dream (Martin 17).

The ever-growing urban unrest also destabilized the South. In response to rapid industrialization, Southern regionalist movements participated in the late 1920s in the *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930) manifesto, which was signed by authors such as Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Donald Davidson (Lutz 150), and inspired authors like Ellen Glasgow in their interpretation of Southern tradition. This manifesto was a lyrical evocation of agrarian virtues, particularly Southern ones, such as “the security of tradition, colorful regional distinctions, simplicity, individual independence, and harmony with nature” (Shideler 293). It also criticized industrialism and urbanism for leading America astray. Based on what has been said so far, it would be possible to assume that there may have been a transition from the plantation tradition and a clear break with the literature of the 1920s. In this period, Southern regionalist movements attempted to revise the earlier literary tradition by offering a new vision of the South, more in line with the wave of modernity, while still retaining the traditionalist aspects of Southern culture.

1.3 Charting Women's Position in the 1920s: Emancipation, Mobility and (Lack of) Opportunities Across Racial Lines

For the purposes of this thesis, it is vitally important to note how the pivotal role of women underwent substantial and impactful changes within the family structure due to the dramatic transition from an agrarian to an increasingly industrialized society. This significant change also encompasses an evolution in the possibilities afforded to women through the powerful feminist movement, which, following the monumental achievement of suffrage and throughout the 1920s, significantly influenced popular culture and thus profoundly affected the literary environment. These sweeping social changes concerned not only women's power of action but also aspects of mobility, sexuality, beauty ideals, marriage, and the innovative new conception of "womanhood," which became a captivating subject of interest among both white and black women. The suffrage movement began paving the way for women's empowerment in the 19th century with the formation of numerous women's clubs. As Ruby Maloni illustrates, the General Federation of Women's Clubs was formed in 1892, and by 1917, it had grown to over one million members (881). These clubs allowed the feminist movement to reach different social statuses; in 1903, it connected with working-class women through the Women's Trade Union League (303), supporting those struggling against wage disparities and discrimination. The ratification of the 19th Amendment in the 1920s significantly empowered women, increasing their political and social influence and enabling more women to enter the job market and political arena. As Thomas C. Reeves asserts, by 1928, five times as many women were employed as in 1918 (86). Women began to redefine traditional Victorian concepts of marriage, motherhood, and womanhood to fit the era's evolving norms. The "New Woman" of the 1920s, associated with the suffragette promotional campaign, represented new freedom for women. Maloni defines the term "New Woman" as a "definition of identity" (380), explaining that this persona encapsulated modern standards of womanhood. Despite failing to vote as a bloc or in greater numbers than men (Freedman 373), the New Women differed sharply from previous generations, achieving

social and economic equality with men for the first time (Freedman 373). However, despite these achievements, the feminist movement of the 1920s was not as effective as hoped. Social reform eventually stalled, and the women's movement declined. The "New Woman" did not meet political expectations, hindered by the conservative political climate and internal weaknesses (Maloni 884). Although a new awareness of the importance of women's independence had developed among young feminists through the publicity about the "New Woman," most women stayed at home, with marriage and family as the feminine ideal, where the husband was still the head of the house (Reeves 86). In the South, where it was most difficult to bring about a change in gender roles, the rigid definition of women's roles persisted, and the "New Woman" had little impact, remaining largely a myth (Robert Wiebe qtd. in Maloni 884).

The "New Woman" is an umbrella term that defined the modern standards of womanhood in the 1920s, which therefore did not express a unified message regarding women's changing roles, as these varied by "region, class, politics, race, ethnicity, age, time, and historical conditions" (Rabinovitch-Fox 2). It could be understood across all racial and class lines; influences from media, consumer culture, and politics allowed for a new understanding of femininity, including for the African American population. For white women, the wave of feminism led to a new conception of "womanhood", while for black women, the revolution centered, according to Edith Rabinovitch-Fox, on the image of the "New Negro Woman" (14). This figure was crucial in reshaping the image of African American women. By the 1920s, alongside the suffrage movement's promotion of a new ideal of womanhood, the term "New Negro Woman" emerged among the African American middle-class. Merging "New Negro" and "New Woman," this term offered a new understanding of racial and sexual identity for black women. Coined by Booth Tarkington's wife (Rabinovitch-Fox 14), it was adopted by African American women to create their own idea of "blackness" (Rabinovitch-Fox 14), a new urban and modern identity that referred to a "racial essence" (Dawahare 22) and a cultural

identity expression. Through this new persona, black women sought to forge their own version of modern black femininity, an ideal based on renewed "respectability, domesticity, and race progress" to politically and ideologically contrast anti-Semitic images and stereotypes such as that of the "black mammy" (Rabinovitch-Fox 14). This new image of black identity inspired authors of the Harlem Renaissance, such as W. E. B. Du Bois, A. Philip Randolph, Marcus Garvey, Alain Locke, James Weldon Johnson, Jessie Fauset (Dawahare 22), and Nella Larsen, to define a new black identity that could combat racist ideals. Indeed, it promoted a "friendly revaluation of black Americans by white America" (Dawahare 23), where being black was something to celebrate and take pride in. Although African Americans were constantly hampered by the systematic racism of Jim Crow laws and the economic hardships caused by the Great Migration, their search for individual identity often served as a vehicle for racial uplift and a means of challenging their subjugation.

Numerous studies have shown that phenomena such as the Great Migration and the "New Negro" movement were closely related to the literary and cultural expression of the Harlem Renaissance (Rabinovitch-Fox 25). This movement embraced literary, musical, theatrical, and visual arts to redefine Black identity, breaking away from white stereotypes and Victorian moral values that reinforced racist beliefs. It was the cultural expression of a changing America in the 1920s from a black consciousness perspective. Critic Gregory Holmes Singleton, in "Birth, Rebirth, and the 'New Negro' of the 1920s" (1982), describes this literary movement in terms of "birth" and "rebirth", noting that "in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance, the themes express an awareness, often self-conscious, of the emergence of a new style and a new direction in black life" (35). Moreover, as Anthony Dawahare explains, the emergence of a new concept of racial identity in the twenties and thirties is closely connected to events such as the Great Migration North, World War I, industrialization, urbanization, nationalist liberation movements, and the growth of internationalism following the Bolshevik Revolution (22). These events inevitably influenced African American authors such as W. E. B. Du Bois, A. Philip Randolph, Marcus Garvey, Alain Locke, James Weldon

Johnson, and Jessie Fauset, who sought to define the African American individual amidst a context of hostilities towards the black population.

Authors like Nella Larsen, whose work *Quicksand* (1928) will be analyzed in the last chapter of this thesis, went further by attempting not only to define African American identity but also to provide a new understanding of black femininity, focusing primarily on women's identity. Larsen and other black female writers explored racial identity through the phenomenon of racial passing, an issue that has long affected America, which has always been divided by the color line. Given that one of the novels examined features a black female character dealing with race ambiguity through passing, it is important to analyze this phenomenon in relation to the difficulties African American women of the 1920s faced in obtaining opportunities available to their white counterparts. This thesis will discuss mobility extensively, analyzing it not only in a literal sense - referring to the possibilities for black and white women to explore the North - but also in terms of economic mobility and social mobility, namely the ability to improve one's social status. The phenomenon of passing, particularly among black women, is linked to this concept, as it was used by "light-skinned" black women to access benefits and opportunities that might otherwise be unavailable. In this sense, we will address the concept of mobility, which not only indicates geographical displacement but also includes the possibility for women, both white and black, to change their social status and overcome inferiority in pursuit of better prospects. In all the novels we will examine, including *Quicksand*, female protagonists undertake journeys to the outside world, accepting the implications that such mobility requires. For black women, mobility acquires a key role as it evokes a form of independence they historically lacked. The 1920s significantly impacted the lives of the black population, including their ability to move in search of favorable opportunities. Regarding geographic mobility, according to Theodore Knorweibel Jr., black migration from farms to cities during the Great Migration was not only a phenomenon of that period but began well before, right after emancipation, when "the illusion of urban opportunities, combined with wartime dislocation and discontent, drew many black families away from their rural occupations and roots" (307). However, what they found were often

unfavorable conditions compared to their expectations, as “the newcomers often found residential segregation, high rents, social ostracism, and racial discrimination” (308). Despite this, the first signs of revolt began to appear through the formation of associations against Jim Crow laws. To achieve racial uplift, many black women who followed the cultural wave of the “New Negro” formed clubs, which became part of the National Association of Colored Women (Maloni 881). During the “club women’s era”, post-Reconstruction African American activists organized into a powerful political force, raising issues that affected African American womanhood (Williams 169). In light of what has been discussed, it is clear that issues such as racial identity, gender roles, and mobility were inextricably intertwined in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. We have examined how historical events and cultural movements shaped the new identities of both white American women and African American women, highlighting their efforts to redefine their societal roles and challenge systemic racism. The subsequent analysis of literary works will further illustrate these themes and their implications for the characters’ journeys toward self-discovery and empowerment, exploring the extent to which the main characters achieve these goals.

CHAPTER TWO

SINCLAIR LEWIS' *MAIN STREET*, A COMPLEX VISION OF AMERICA IN TRANSITION

2.1 Contrasts in *Main Street*: Criticism of Traditional Values and Modern Civilization

Main Street (1920) by Sinclair Lewis is considered a satirical critique of the narrow-mindedness of small Midwestern small towns. However, this view may seem oversimplified when considering the novel's historical context. According to Joel Fisher, the novel can be understood in "two very distinct ways" (423): either as a straightforward satirical portrayal of rural life, or as complex narrative rich with other kinds of criticism. Viewing Sinclair Lewis's work in the latter way allows for a deeper reflection on how America was perceived during the 1920s and provides insight into why the novel's main female character returns to her small-town life. Carol Kennicott, née Milford, is a college-educated young woman from the Twin Cities, Minneapolis, who after graduating pursues a career as a librarian. Following a one-year courtship with the reserved and mild-mannered small-town doctor Will Kennicott, she gets married and move to Kennicott's hometown, Gopher Prairie, where she begins her new marital life. Carol hopes to fulfill her true calling, namely to "get [her] hands on one of these prairie towns and make it beautiful" (Lewis 28). In Gopher Prairie, she engages with the villagers, their customs, and their ideas, which turn out to be very conservative. Despite her efforts to adapt, Carol cannot accept the village women's gossiping and the villagers' resistance to change. After several years and unsuccessful attempts to bring change into town, she decides to move to Washington, D.C. with her son, Hugh, seeking opportunities that would free her from Gopher Prairie's oppression. In Washington, Carol meets other women who have left their hometowns, finds a job at the Bureau of War Risk Insurance, and even connects with a leader of the

feminist movement. Although she enjoys the capital and works there for two years, Carol feels lonely and alienated in that urban environment. Eventually, Will Kennicott visits Carol in Washington and begins courting her again. Despite the maturity and independence gained in Washington, recognizing Will's true love, Carol decides to return to Gopher Prairie. At first glance, considering Carol's growing discontent in Gopher Prairie, the book seems to harshly criticize only the small villages of the Midwest. However, Carol's ultimate choice to return to the small-town village after her urban experience suggests that Lewis's work might be more complex, circumscribing a possible dissatisfaction with the industrialized city environment as well.

As Miles Orvell explains in *The Death and Life of Main Street. Small Towns in American Memory, Space, and Community* (2012), Lewis's strength in creating a work like *Main Street* lies in the leitmotifs of Revolt Literature. For Orvell, this genre aimed to depict individuals who were "dissolved under the pressure of conformity into the common run of community" (76), where frivolity, narrow-mindedness, and a general rejection of novelty prevailed. Lewis follows a pattern common to Revolt Literature, portraying a character who tries to resist small-village conformity, in order to denounce the narrow-mindedness of Midwest townspeople and highlight the potential for change. In *Main Street* (1920) Carol Kennicott, whom Lewis visualizes as the "rebellious twentieth-century woman" (Marshall 529), embodies progressive ideals and the spirit of the Progressive movement, which are sharply in contrast with the old-fashioned conservative values of Gopher Prairie. At the time of its publication, when the distinctions between urban and rural life were becoming increasingly pronounced, the novel was primarily seen as a critique of rural small-town America. As Lewis explained in the novel's preface, the author conceived the novel to represent not just a single Midwestern village, but America as a whole ("The town is [...] the continuation of Main Streets everywhere", Lewis 25), offering a "map of American society" (Orvell 73), and Gopher Prairie as a "microcosm of human life" (Orvell 75). When published, *Main Street* became emblematic of the criticism toward provincialism, leading Van Doren to identify it as part of the "revolt-from-

the-village" literature. The novel delves into themes such as the relationship between the individual and the community, societal expectations – especially on women, class differences, and the clash between progressive ideals and traditional values. This cultural conflict, evident not only in the differing mindsets of Carol and the townspeople, but also in the contrasting settings of the small village and industrialized Washington, D.C., is central to the narrative, shaping many of Carol's life choices. Sinclair Lewis's inspiration to depict this cultural contrast and discontent with rural society also came from H. L. Mencken, who attributed the cultural problem of America's repressive, moralistic spirit to the stagnation caused by the enduring "legacy of puritanism" (Orvell 80). Van Wyck Brooks, whom Lewis admired, concurred with Mencken in believing that there were two opposing cultural forces in America: the "spiritual and intellectual" 'highbrow' culture and the "practical and worldly" 'lowbrow' culture (Orvell 80). The former represented modern American idealism and progressivism, while the latter embodied puritan ideals and values. Lewis aimed to reflect precisely these cultural sentiments primarily through the interaction and clash between Carol and the small-village community. According to James Marshall, Carol's rebellion against traditional values occurs within Lewis' "unrecognized political context", which "enables his brilliantly executed satirical vision of cultural sterility" (530). Indeed, Lewis employs numerous caricatured characters, each symbolically representing different aspects of village conservatism, to paint a precise cultural portrait of traditionalist America. This narrative approach may reflect Lewis's intent to challenge the stagnant traditionalism of Old America as opposed to industrial civilization, using Carol as the primary vehicle for this critique.

Criticism of traditional values emerges right from the opening chapters of the novel. From the very beginning, Carol strives to implement her ideas of beauty and social reform to modernize the spirit of the town. When she moves into Will Kennicott's house, she begins to "make the house her own" (Lewis 68), replacing old furniture and family heirlooms with new items, reflecting her need for change. She also organizes several parties to connect with the villagers and tries to impress them

with her games, but the community does not seem to engage, finding the party "delightful" (Lewis 75) despite continuing with their traditional stunts. Moreover, Carol actively tries to make a difference by proposing to rebuild the small city hall, but the minister's wife dismisses her efforts, prioritizing a united church over cultural refinement. Indeed, people in Gopher Prairie often exhibit a parochial attitude that prevents them from broadening their horizons ("I've had people that have traveled all over the world tell me time and again that Gopher Prairie is the prettiest place in the Middlewest", Lewis 112), making Carol feel like she does not belong. As a cultured and educated woman, Carol repeatedly attempts to spark interest in literature and philosophy among the villagers, who are indifferent and superficial towards these topics. At one of the first the Thanatopsis Club meetings, for instance, she is disappointed to learn that the women's study group dedicates only one session to discussing English poetry. The cultural clash is also evident when Carol tries to stage a modern, 'highbrow' play by Bernard Shaw, but the villagers choose instead to perform a farce called "The Girl from Kankakee," (Lewis 163) rejecting her modernist approach. Indeed, Carol is often the spokesperson of progressive ideals, such as the issues on labor movement or feminist stances and throughout the novel she does not hold back from expressing her vision. As soon as she meets the female members of the Jolly Seventeen women's club, they complain about the maids' wages being too high. Carol defends the maids, and later is accused of being too progressive ("Carol Kennicott, you're probably right, but you're too much ahead of the times.", Lewis 81). Furthermore, at one of the first parties Carol hosts at her house, she tries discussing important social issues such as the labor movement, but she learns that the people of Gopher Prairie do not approve of unions and profit sharing ("All this profit-sharing and welfare work and insurance and old-age pension is simply poppycock. Enfeebles a workman's independence—and wastes a lot of honest profit." Lewis 56). Privately, Kennicott even advises her to watch what she says because the townspeople are very conservative ("Uh, Carrie — — You ought to be more careful about shocking folks." Lewis 58). Another element that demonstrates the lack of interest in current issues is the scene in which at the Thanatopsis Club Carol suggests that they discuss relevant social issues like the labor movement, but the ladies ignore

her idea and choose to discuss the subject of “Furnishings and China” (Lewis 103) instead. Another way Lewis strategically challenges the town’s narrow-mindedness is through class contrast and by denouncing the town’s hypocrisy, juxtaposing the ideologies of different social classes within the village.

The character of the money-oriented banker, Ezra Stowbody, represents the materialism, narrow-mindedness and social prejudice of the townspeople in his distrust of labor unions, socialists, and immigrants: “Trouble enough with these foreign farmers; if you don’t watch these Swedes they turn socialist or populist or some fool thing on you in a minute. [...] I don’t mind their being democrats, so much, but I won’t stand having socialists around” (Lewis 56). In contrast to Stowbody, who embodies the middle-class of Gopher Prairie, is the Swedish immigrant farmer, Miles Bjornstam, who characterizes himself as a democrat: “I am about the only man in Johnson County that remembers the joker in the Declaration of Independence about Americans being supposed to have the right to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Lewis 99). Known as “The Red Swede” (Lewis 76) and considered insane by townspeople, he represents the lower strata of society and, because of his ideas, is perceived as “other”. Further ostracized figures in the novel include Bea Sorenson and Fern Mullins, as well as Guy Pollock, true liberal radical among the laborers, with whom Carol feels a closer alignment to her ideals. The hypocrisy of traditional values that Lewis aims to highlight emerges in numerous instances. For example, Mrs. Bogart is depicted as a religious hypocrite; while she urges Carol and Kennicott to go to church, lamenting any nonconformity, one of her sons, Cy Bogart, who is a member of a gang, falsely accuses schoolteacher Fern Mullins, whom she calls a “designing woman” (Lewis 259), of sexual assault, forcing her to leave town. Fern's tragedy allows Lewis to demonstrate and ridicule the hypocrisy of Gopher Prairie, which Carol believes is accountable for Cy Bogart’s irresponsible and evil behavior (“The job of corrupting Cy was done by your sinless town, five years ago!”, Lewis 260). Moreover, right before Bea Sorenson, Miles’s wife, dies of typhoid along with their child, numerous women who initially criticized Miles visit Bea, but

he drives them away, saying they should have done so when she was well. Offended, the women leave. When Miles departs the town, the women accuse him of neglecting his family ("Too bad about this Bea that was your hired girl. But I don't waste any sympathy on that man of hers. Everybody says he drank too much, and treated his family awful, and that's how they got sick", Lewis 224) showing that not even the tragic circumstances under which Miles found himself have allowed them to free themselves from their prejudices.

As we have seen, as Carol grows increasingly dissatisfied and hopeless about the possibility of making a change, Sinclair Lewis seems to denounce the townspeople's lack of originality, their cultural stagnation, and their indifference to intellectual and cultural matters. However, the contradictions exist not only between the townspeople and Carol but also within Carol herself, as her strong ideas on marriage and motherhood constantly waver. For example, at the beginning of the novel, she rejects marriage in favor of pursuing a career as a librarian. However, she eventually surrenders to marriage, only to question it immediately after, as following Will to Gopher Prairie binds her to live "inescapably" (Lewis 41) in a small-town village. Throughout the novel, she constantly vacillates between staying with Will and leaving him, eventually leading her to separate from him for two years when she moves to the capital to find freedom. This ambivalence is also evident in Carol's reluctance to become a mother. Initially, she dismisses motherhood, not only because it means conforming to societal expectations ("Please, dear nebulous Lord, not now! Bearded sniffy old men sitting and demanding that we bear children. If they had to bear them—!", Lewis 45) but also because it would tighten the "manacles of marriage" (Brooks 1), making her feel even more confined to the small-town village. Despite her initial resistance, Carol eventually yields to societal expectations over her role as the doctor's wife. As she feared, impending motherhood makes her feel "trapped" and "kidnapped" (Lewis 179) by the town. When she becomes pregnant, she finds the pregnancy disagreeable at first; after giving birth to a son, she initially dislikes the infant for causing her a difficult labor, but soon feels overwhelming love for him ("Hugh was her reason for living,

promise of accomplishment in the future, shrine of adoration—and a diverting toy.", Lewis 177). However, motherhood eventually depersonalizes her, making her feel even more oppressed and causing her to lose her rebellious nature, as "her opinionation seemed dead" and she no longer had any "desire for escape" (Lewis 177). These continuous fluctuations and the general dissatisfaction caused by the oppression Carol feels in Gopher Prairie inevitably lead her to want to leave the town, seeking a new mobility that would allow her to indulge with her need to explore new territories (Barnard 22) to find her freedom and happiness. This trajectory mirrors the "revolt-from-the-village" plot, where the protagonist, due to their artistic and intellectual inclinations and a sense of feeling different (Orvell 98), flees to an urban destination. In the city, Carol initially feels happy and free, as Washington gave her "all the graciousness in which she had had faith" (Lewis 289). Although she finds her office job dull, she enjoys city life, particularly the cultural attractions and beautiful buildings. Carol seems to have realized her desire for escape, but this quickly turns into a profound sense of loneliness and not belonging. Over her two years in Washington D.C., her work becomes "tolerable, far more tolerable than housework, but it was not adventurous," and she gradually begins to feel out of place in the urban setting ("Carol was not a defiant philosopher but a faded government clerk from Gopher Prairie, Minnesota", Lewis 293). Paradoxically, through her interactions with other small-town women living in Washington D.C., Carol realizes that compared to other small towns, "Gopher Prairie was a model of bold color, intelligent planning, and frenzied intellectuality" (Lewis 291). Gradually, Carol reaches the climax of her progressive inner growth. She realizes that, instead of trying to change the mentality of Gopher Prairie's inhabitants and wage a war against provincialism, she should have been railing against the larger institutions such as "Polite Society, the Family, the Church, Sound Business, the Party, the Country, the Superior White Race", to which she should have reacted with irony and dissent ("the only defense against them, Carol beheld, is unembittered laughter", (Lewis 292). Speaking through Carol, Lewis unmasks American institutions and older beliefs as they "insinuate their tyranny under a hundred guises and pompous nameses", exercising their monolithic power over the inhabitants of Gopher Prairie. Moreover, despite her

contact with suffragettes, Carol "never became a prominent suffragist" (Lewis 290) as she was unwilling to be arrested and imprisoned for the cause. When Will Kennicott visits her and begs her to return to Gopher Prairie with her own time, she reflects on photographs of the "sun-speckled ferns among birches on the shore of Minniemashie, wind-rippled miles of wheat, the porch of their own house where Hugh had played, Main Street where she knew every window and every face" (Lewis 295), which trigger in her a sense of familiarity that makes Carol question her future in the capital. Ultimately, Kennicott returns to Gopher Prairie alone, and Carol decides to follow in a couple of months. She no longer feels hatred for the town, only sympathy and understanding. In the closing lines of *Main Street*, Carol reflects, "I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith" (Lewis 305). Through Carol's "defeat", Lewis seems to acknowledge that one person may not be able to reform a town with their ideals but can continue to advocate for reform.

As we have seen so far, Carol's journey of self-discovery in *Main Street* is not one-dimensional. The female heroine not only moves from the small-town village to the city, but also returns to the village, a double trajectory that must be considered in its entirety and that makes the novel comply with the "revolt-from-the-village" plot just partially. Sinclair Lewis seems to revise the traditional plot of Revolt Literature as Carol feels out of place, overwhelmed, and alienated by Washington's cosmopolitanism, where she is "too old to pass as a 'new woman' and too conventional to embrace the spirit of modernity" (Orvell 91), even though that dimension represented an alternative to life in the small village. According to James Nixon, *Main Street* can even be read against urban values, rather than against small-town villages, as Carol seems to be "unable to ever fully conform to the urban practices she wishes to emulate", wishing to "appear urban while in the safety of her traditional values" (Nixon 6). Indeed, despite her radical ideas, she feels quite out of place, although in admiration for their cause, with her roommates and suffragist acquaintances, feeling "sometimes shocked quite as she had shocked Gopher Prairie by these girls with their cigarettes and elfish knowledge" (Lewis 290). This limbo, where Carol is divided between wanting to be culturally urban

but unable to fully reject traditional values, reflects an ambivalence towards the distinct realities and cultures present in America. By the end of the novel, it is unclear whether Lewis was more harshly criticizing the rural village or the cosmopolitanism of the city. It would be fair to assume that the answer lies somewhere in between, in a "middlebrow culture" (Orvell 85): Lewis did not necessarily want to offer an urban alternative to the small country village but simply to give proof of conflicting cultures in America. As Nixon asserts, in examining *Main Street* as a critique of urban culture, we see that Lewis "never intended to criticize small-town America any more than he meant to criticize any other form of municipality" (11). Miles Orvell seems to agree, stating that by having Carol return to the small village, "Lewis forces a resolution to the story of his heroine's rebellion which is, for her, neither defeat nor victory" (91). Indeed, on the one hand, Carol seems to have contracted the dreaded "Village Virus," which, according to Guy Pollock, "is the germ which [...] infects ambitious people who stay too long in the provinces," after having had a "glimpse of the world that thinks and laughs," eventually "[returning] to their swamp" (Lewis 123), accepting a life of seclusion. On the other hand, Gopher Prairie eventually turns out not to be such a harsh place for the female protagonist, as it provided a community network she did not find in Washington D.C. When she comes back, Carol goes from outcast to solid member of the community, finally being accepted by the old men in town ("Be a good thing for most of us roughnecks if we did have a smart woman to tell us how to fix up the town. [...] And you can bet Mrs. Kennicott is smart, even if she is skittish. Glad to see her back", Lewis 302). In the end, Carol seems to have changed her perception of small-town life without renouncing her rebellious spirit. She affirms she would not be "utterly defeated" by her choice to return to the village, as "she was glad of her rebellion" (Lewis 299). Gopher Prairie, in the end, turned out being "no longer empty land in the sun-glare; it was the living tawny beast which she had fought and made beautiful by fighting" (Lewis 299). Her words about her rebellion are emblematic because they demonstrate a sort of mediation between two different urges, namely accept and revolutionize, escaping and returning, which may parallel and symbolize the two coexisting cultures in America: rural and urban civilizations. The coexistence of these two sides of Carol Kennicott - and of America

- will allow her to continue fighting for change in the rural setting. She now rages against the inadequacies and hypocrisies of old American myths such as the Church, family, marriage, and the State that exert their power over individuals, preventing cultural change toward progress. Sinclair Lewis, in *Main Street*, attempts to prove that the ideal of the idyllic village is actually unobtainable and with Carol Kennicott's return to the village and rejection of urban reality, Lewis may not leave us with a solution, but at least with an understanding of the complexity of the cultural problem in America.

2.2 Carol Kennicott's American Identity: Between Social Realism and Idealistic "Pioneerism"

We have seen how Carol Kennicott eventually decides to abandon her claims to freedom and independence to accept Gopher Prairie's conformity. What is Carol's cultural identity then? Carol J. Town asks a fundamental question, namely, "what defines Carol Kennicott's 'Americanness'? Her unconditional critique of small-town traditions, or her rejection of modern, industrialised America?" (1). Seeing Carol's return to the village of Gopher Prairie, it is unclear to what extent the character respects the idea of the American Dream that had accompanied her from the very first pages. Lewis offers us a double vision of an American identity under construction, divided by a revolutionary spirit, embodied in Carol, and a pessimistic realism that seems to hinder her drive for progress. To express this, Lewis skillfully uses symbols referring to the American past and traditional American ideology, as opposed to the Jeffersonian ideology that instead looks towards the future, through Carol's eyes. Joel Fisher explains that the author of *Main Street* sets the events in a very specific period of American history, namely that of the closing of the frontier, an important historical moment as it saw the birth of two movements: "the closing of the frontier and the development of an urban, industrialised society" (425). It was not, however, a clear-cut transition, but a blurred one, where the individual began to perceive a different dimension of his own identity, precisely because of the existence of these two Americas. According to Fisher, this was a fundamental period in the formation of American

identity, since “the combination of the two movements categorically signals the end of the period of luxury in which, whatever the actual state of affairs, the individual American might reasonably believe that his existence and identity were not heavily determined by nation and structure” (425). In effect, the American individual began to belong to a state that made him feel free in his rights, but at the same time limited by his norms. In this period, which marks a turning point for the country’s history, through *Main Street* Lewis scrutinizes America and “the ways in which the individual American constructs his identity” (Fisher 423). Lewis’ intent seems to show how the American individual sees himself at the dawn of a century of significant change, highlighting the contradictions that these changes bring to light in the national context.

As the midwestern town on Main Street acts as the “barometer of American culture” (Orvell 98), Sinclair Lewis attempts to represent American society in a historical period in which being American has not yet acquired a precise definition. It is rather blurred and divided between two different cultural realities. In depicting Carol Milford, Lewis sought to portray a symbolic Jeffersonian figure in nature, recalling a lost pioneer spirit. In the first pages of the book, we read that Carol's rebellion reflects that “spirit of that bewildered empire called the American Middlewest” (Lewis 26), namely a pioneering spirit influenced by Lewis’ framework of idealism (Marshall 531) that perfectly mirrors the aspirations of a new generation of authors attempting to offer an understanding of America and to offer a model, an ideal, of nationhood. This theme is explored in *Main Street* through numerous symbols associated with the myth of the frontier, with Carol's pioneering and rebellious spirit being a prominent example. Her reformist drive aligns with the modern ideal of civilization, manifesting in her desire to escape from Gopher Prairie. However, Carol's eventual return calls into question the effectiveness of this pioneering spirit, as it clashes with the political, social, and ideological realities of Midwestern villages. In *Main Street*, social realism, implausible satire, and equally implausible romance “merge and clash sharply with Jeffersonian idealism,” representing the other side of Lewis’s writing (Fisher 422-423). This inevitable conflict

between social realism and pioneering idealism is embodied by Carol's dual nature; she simultaneously represents Sinclair Lewis's pioneering heroine and idealism, while also appearing as a victim of the prevailing traditionalist social reality. In this context, Carol's dual nature prompts a reflection on her Americanness, echoing Town's other inquiry: "If her rebellion is typical of a certain kind of American temperament, then what does her eventual integration into—and reluctant acceptance of—small-town life mean?" (Town 1). *Main Street* provides numerous insights into what it means to be American through Carol Milford's character and understanding her Americanness is crucial in light of her decision to return to the village. As Town suggests, it is unclear whether her American identity is defined by her willingness to escape in pursuit of the American Dream, or by her rejection of the urban promise. To fully grasp this, one must examine Carol's identity and her final decision within the context of the Pioneer spirit of freedom, which is emblematic of the American Dream, and the realism of her social condition, determining where one begins and the other ends.

In his fiction, Lewis projects, as Emerson and Whitman did, "the values of democratic individualism and a sublime conception of the future" (Love 559), offering alternatives to that part of American society that he aimed to criticize. At times, this new vision of the future is proposed in Lewis' work using language that recalls the old motifs of the American tradition, such as those related to the myth of the frontier and the native landscape. Such symbolism could recall the importance of the past in the perspective of an ideal future of America, which is personified in the figure of Carol. Throughout the novel, the author often alludes to Minnesota's pioneer history to illustrate how the past impacts the present. Gopher Prairie townspeople, with their conservatism and parochialism, have preserved the traditional, puritan values of their pioneer forebears. In contrast, Carol, who was raised up in the East and is an educated woman, embodies the progressive, pioneer spirit of the early twentieth century and, not surprisingly, constantly feels out of place in Gopher Prairie. Carol's pioneering idealism emerges from the very first lines of *Main Street*. In the novel's opening scene,

Carol is standing on the hill looking at the landscape and the nostalgic description recalls memories of an epic past that left its mark on the flour-mills and the city of Minneapolis and St. Paul:

> "On a hill by the Mississippi where Chippewasa camped two generations ago, a girl stood in relief against the cornflower blue of Northern sky. She saw no Indians now; she saw flour-mills and the blinking windows of skyscrapers in Minneapolis and St. Paul. Nor was she thinking of squaws and portages, and the Yankee fur-traders whose shadows were all about her. She was meditating upon walnut fudge, the plays of Brieux, the reasons why heels run over, and the fact that the chemistry instructor had stared at the new coiffure which concealed her ears. A breeze which had crossed a thousand miles of wheatlands bellied her taffeta skirt in a line so graceful, so full of animation and moving beauty, that the heart of a chance watcher on the lower road tightened to wistfulness over her quality of suspended freedom." (Lewis 26)

The notion of "suspended freedom" is relevant here. As observed by Carol J. Town, the "suspended freedom" exercised by Carol belongs, quoting Lewis, to a "common American past" (Lewis 35) combined with the ahistoricism of the Northern Middlewest region (Town 1). In this scene, Carol seems to hold the future of this land in her hands, like a true pioneer heroine fully in control of her freedom. Throughout the novel, Carol's pioneering spirit is paralleled by her male counterpart, Miles Bjornstam. Bjornstam shares Carol's ideals and is depicted as "Lewis' free spirit and sociologically fated pioneer redivivus" (Marshall 531). Their meeting on the open land beyond Main Street alludes to their common desire of independence (533). Indeed, despite being an outcast in Gopher Prairie, Miles embodies the perfect ideal of the independent Westerner (Marshall 536), often associated with the open landscape (Marshall 537), as to symbolize the democratic freedom of his liberal nature. Despite Carol and Miles' alignment in the quest for freedom, only one of them escapes the "Village Virus". While Carol reluctantly returns to the village as its sole liberal voice, Miles, after losing his wife and son Olaf, indulges his own pioneering desire for freedom by leaving town and is ultimately silenced. Their relationship highlights Lewis' portrayal of idealism as Carol and Miles, "both seeking freedom as individuals, are eloquent allegories of the pioneer in continued agonic struggle against cultural erosion" (Marshall 538). Another aspect that defines Carol's pioneering identity is her

inclination towards feminist ideals. Although, as we have seen above, feminist hopes for independence only partly took root in Carol's life, in the capital Carol is finally able to try living and working among other women. The lessons imparted to her by the ‘generalissima’ make the two years she spent in Washington an allegory to a ‘liberating education’ (Marshall 543) and liberal education for Carol. These lessons, on the one hand, allow her to bring feminism to Gopher Prairie, indulging her pioneering identity despite her reluctance to return, but on the other, ‘her achievement is to become an average person in revolt, that is, an allegorical pioneer whose protesting voice of “commonplaceness” articulates strong resistance to the encroachments of dishonest authorities’ (Marshall 543). Here, Carol’s “commonplaceness”, namely representing any woman in a small village, is here intended with the implicit feminine heroism characterizing the choice to return and continuing pursuing her liberal and progressive ideals, it may also convey Lewis’ idea of realism that limits and at the same time defines Carol’s social status.

Carol’s idealistic and freedom-oriented spirit clashes with the harsh realism of the society in which she lives, as she must deal with obstacles such as the challenges of being a woman, the implications of motherhood, and the limits to feminism and her heroism. While Marshall views Carol’s “commonplaceness” (534) positively as part of her American identity - representing any young woman in any small town in America who rebels - this commonplaceness might also denote the opposite of a modern pioneering spirit. Carol confronts her own commonplaceness when she moves to Washington, D.C.; reflecting on her freedom, she asserts that “it seemed to her that she was of some significance because she was commonplaceness, the ordinary life of the age, made articulate and protesting” (Lewis 298). This acknowledgment of being an ordinary woman whose life is fulfilled by protesting for a cause is fueled by the lesson from the “generalissima of suffrage” (298) on heroism and self-sacrifice. When Carol laments that she is not “heroic” enough (298) to effect change, the feminist suffragette with whom she works explains that the effectiveness of one’s revolutionary spirit and agency is “not a matter of heroism” but a “matter of endurance” (299), and endurance is precisely

what Carol chooses in the end. For Marshall, this lesson has positive implications, as it enables Carol to "accept her entrapment in history as a woman and civilizer and to believe that - with this strategy - she may effectively return to Will and Main Street" (Marshall 543). Understanding her condition as a woman in a feminist environment such as the one in Washington D.C. allows the development of Carol's rebellious identity, which Marshall describes as "an allegorical pioneer whose protesting voice of 'commonplaceness' articulates strong resistance to the encroachments of dishonest authorities" (Marshall 543). Nixon does not have the same positive view on Carol's heroism in her "commonplaceness"; he argues that she is, "for all of her pretenses of rebellion and urban sophistication, very traditional-minded" (Nixon 11). This perspective seems accurate when considering that she avoids anything that might cause a scandal. For example, she refrains from engaging in a love affair with Guy Pollock, a liberal radical lawyer who initially showed interest in her, or with Erik Valborg, a young tailor who shares her urban aspirations and introduces her to true love. Additionally, in the final pages of the novel, Carol admits that "she had been creating a myth of the town through her own urban pretensions" (Nixon 11). Consequently, even though she tries to bring progressive change to Gopher Prairie, "her commitment slowly dies" (Maglin 796) after the birth of her second child, as her life is once again overwhelmed by the demands of rural living. In this light, Carol Milford represents for Lewis the "ordinary person of the time" (Marshall 532), who inevitably succumbs to the limitations imposed by her pointless attempts at reform, the constraints of her marriage to Will Kennicott, and the broader societal obstacles related to womanhood, motherhood, the naiveté of her heroism, and the impracticality of pursuing feminism. What ultimately binds Carol to Gopher Prairie is her willingness to continue her marital life there, despite the efforts to escape that condition.

The notion of marriage seems to be crucial in the novel. The representation of the relationship between Carol and Will exemplifies the typical dynamics between an American husband and wife, but it is also a lens through which the reader observes the interaction between two completely different people, with different ideals and cultural backgrounds. In the novel, Will Kennicott represents

American patriotism, characterized by his "fondness for tramping and the outdoors, his sense of the heroic Midwestern past, his occasional awareness of its possibilities for the future" (Love 565), qualities that, not by chance, appeal to Carol. However, as the novel progresses, their differences become more pronounced: Carol advocates for social reform and embodies the forces of change, while Kennicott symbolizes Gopher Prairie's resistance to change, favoring the preservation of the status quo and traditional habits. At times, Carol's interests in beauty, nobility, poetry, art and architecture are perceived by Kennicott as her condescending demeanor. Their conflicts reveal deeper tensions in their relationship: Carol criticizes Kennicott's friends for their rude and inappropriate behavior and disapproves of Kennicott's pragmatic approach to issues like income taxes, which she views as unpatriotic and overly materialistic. Kennicott, in turn, reproaches Carol for having "highbrow" interests and being preoccupied with "fool novels and books and all this highbrow junk" (Lewis 208). Will Kennicott is the unbothered, uncritical mind of Gopher Prairie. Despite his patriotic heroism as a doctor, he is depicted as an obtuse, practical but inarticulate (Marshall 539) and unimaginative individual, unable to grasp the social tragedy to which his wife is exposed to in Gopher Prairie.

In the second half of the novel, Carol and Kennicott's deteriorating marriage takes center stage as the novel's main conflict, as both characters seek romance elsewhere. While Carol almost gives vent to her platonic love for Erik Valborg, Will, discontented in his relationship, indulges in a real affair with Maud Dyer. In numerous aspects, their struggle epitomizes the timeless conflict between sexes, summed up by Carol in Chapter 24: "There are two races of people, only two, and they live side by side. His calls mine 'neurotic'; mine calls his 'stupid.' We'll never understand each other, never; and it's madness for us to debate—to lie together in a hot bed in a creepy room—enemies, yoked." (Lewis 208). Their contrasts are intentional. Lewis conceptualizes marriage in *Main Street* as a contract between the individual and American territory, with Gopher Prairie serving as "the ironic setting of this epic contract-making" (Fisher 428). The novel's historical and political context, set

during the closing of the frontier, enhances its significance. Carol, raised in the East by a liberal lawyer father, embodies the novel's idealism and its 'legal' American identity, while Gopher Prairie, symbolizing conquered America, legitimizes her existence. Joel Fisher elucidates this union, suggesting that while Carol represents "the abstract and disengaged utopianism produced by the legal birth of America in the East," Will Kennicott "is her necessary complement, the elemental contact with land and human life that must fuse with the invented nation in order to close the frontier and complete America" (428). The critic thus frames Carol and Kennicott's marriage as a political contract. Understood in this way, this relationship represents a real geographical and political union between the 'natural', conquered America, represented by Will, and the America of the East, namely the 'legal' side impersonated by Carol. This union merges two Americas, the traditionalist America tied to the past and the progressive America looking towards a different future. Lewis may therefore have conceived this relationship as a sign of the *de facto* closure of the frontier (Fisher 429) in the context of a promise of marriage between the American Dream of progress and the land, two foundational myths of American identity. The ultimate product of these two Americas is their children, who represent the continuation of their parents' identities. Hugh, who resembles his practical father, and Carol's second child, whom she hopes will embody her liberal and feminist values, signify the merging of these opposing ideals. Hugh's practicality and weariness of imaginative play ("I'm tired of playing train", Lewis 287) reflect Will's pragmatism, while Carol's aspirations for her daughter ("Carol could not decide whether she was to become a feminist leader or marry a scientist or both", Lewis 303) extend her progressive vision. This dynamic seems to underscore the novel's exploration of American identity through the synthesis of individual and collective ideals.

Based on all that has been said so far, it is evident that the marriage between Carol and Will, along with their fundamental differences, symbolically represents two facets of American identity. Carol's reformist and pioneering idealism exists primarily in spirit, while the realistic America, rooted in the past, manifests in the conflicts between Carol and Gopher Prairie, as well as between Carol and

Will. Their union occurs within a crucial context: defining what America is and what it means to be American. This union, much like Carol's dual-sided nature, symbolically echoes the *de facto* closure of the frontier and the legal establishment of a governing structure with norms and limits, formalized through marriage. Carol's return to the rural village after her urban experience, signifies not just her union with Will, but also her accepting of the constraints of married life and the limits of her status, which encloses her in the role of wife and mother. Eventually, Carol fails to satisfy her urban ambitions in the city, where she realizes that Gopher Prairie isn't so bad after all, nor can she modernize Gopher Prairie despite her pioneering idealism, which exists only in spirit. In the village, as evidenced by the final scenes, despite the prosperity brought by innovations in Gopher Prairie while Carol was in the capital, the town has grown more conservative (Orvell 97), and it becomes clear that even the most progressive changes cannot make Gopher Prairie a competitive place in terms of productivity, inclusion, and culture. If it is true what Fisher claims, namely that Lewis' conclusion consists in claiming that "the force of ideal American cannot escape from the necessity of bonding with natural America" (430), it would therefore be impossible to imagine a progressive America standing alone or capable of overcoming any sort of conformity. In essence, therefore, I believe the union between Carol and Will, and therefore the main character's ultimate choice to return to small-town life, appears to be Sinclair Lewis's attempt to forge a new American identity, trying to reconcile the differences between the two Americas, which, however, can neither exist separately nor dominate each other.

CHAPTER THREE

REIMAGINING OF SOUTHERN TRADITION IN ELLEN GLASGOW'S *BARREN GROUND*

3.1 Dualisms in *Barren Ground*: "Old" vs "New" South

Ellen Glasgow published *Barren Ground* (1925) at a sensitive time, when Southern writing underwent a sharp transition from 19th-century local color to early 20th-century regionalism. This complex period made it difficult for female authors to express their literary vision. But in her works, Ellen Glasgow not only inspired future regionalist movements such as the Agrarians, but also rendered a gendered representation of Southern regional identity, becoming one of the most representative figures of the Southern Renaissance. Tanya Ann Kennedy reclaims Glasgow as a member of the primary movement of Southern regionalism of the interwar period (43), which found its major expression during the 1930s. Starting her literary career before World War I, Glasgow was considered as a "forerunner of the Southern Renaissance and modernism" (Rusak 67). Her intention was to provide a "realistic portrayal of the South as a counter-reaction to the fiction that eulogized the antebellum South and transformed it into the mythical paradise lost" (Rusak 67). Essentially, Glasgow moved away from the plantation tradition to reimagine the South.

Between 24 and 25 October 1931, in Charlottesville, Virginia, an important cultural meeting called the "Southern Writers Conference" was held, proposed and presided by Ellen Glasgow, at the University of Virginia, where several authors, philosophers, and historians gave their views on what it meant to be "Southern" (Scura 415). On this occasion, the value of Southern writing, including the literary production of Ellen Glasgow, was recognized. This conference celebrated what we know today as the "Southern Literary Renaissance" (Scura 415). Three years earlier, Glasgow had already

defined what makes a Southern literary product great, namely the coexistence of elements such as "power, passion, pity, ecstasy and anguish, hope and despair" (Glasgow qtd. in Scura 418). Such elements also characterize *Barren Ground*, one of her most autobiographical works, in which Glasgow matures not only a new vision of Southern identity but also a new vision of Southern womanhood through a gendered regional perspective. Ellen Glasgow offered through *Barren Ground* a new image of the South, "not only in constructing the South as place, but also in reconstructing their own identity as women and place in society in that culture" (Ewell 160). Authors like Ellen Glasgow attempted to question and problematize the traditionalist and restrictive culture of the South while maintaining its idyllic and mythical aspect.

Glasgow sets *Barren Ground* in Virginia, the author's homeland, telling the story of a young woman who flees to New York following a love disappointment, only to return with the ambition of making her parents' farm, Old Farm, with its now infertile soil, prosperous, and acquiring the old Greylock farm, now left adrift. Dorinda Oakley lives in Pedlar's Mill, within a family of low social strata, with a religious mother and a practical, good-natured Calvinist father who lacks the ability to make the land fruitful. Dorinda falls in love with Jason Greylock, who, after promising to marry her, leaves her to marry Geneva Ellgood under pressure from his father, as he belongs to a wealthier family. Dorinda, distraught, moves to New York City, where she loses the baby she was unknowingly carrying due to an accident. Here, Dr. Faraday, who rescues her from the street, proves benevolent and willing to help her; he keeps her with him to look after his children. Dorinda meets Dr. Burch, who teaches her farming techniques that will enable her to manage the land once she returns to Pedlar's Mill. When Dorinda receives a letter from her family telling her that her father is dying, she decides to return to Virginia. Upon her return, her father dies, and her mother passes away soon after. She decides to set up a dairy farm and acquire the Greylock property, which has since deteriorated. The story follows Dorinda's personal vicissitudes over thirty years, witnessing the passing of her

youth. Eventually, Dorinda manages to establish a successful business, but she renounces her sexuality and emotionality because of the emotional trauma she suffered as a girl.

Glasgow harshly and ironically criticizes the past values and traditions of Pedlar's Mill, Dorinda's village. This criticism immediately emerges from the first chapter, where the reader is drawn into the landscape of Pedlar's Mill, and a "girl in an orange-coloured shawl", namely Dorinda, observes the land, which is described as "bare, starved, desolate," (Glasgow 3) immediately conveying the character's isolation in a deteriorating land. The description continues with the image of infertile land, ruined by war and the tenant system's inability to make it fruitful ("The soil, impoverished by the war and the tenant system which followed the war", Glasgow 3). The opening pages provide an overview of the naturalistic imagery typical of the "agrarian perspective" (Kennedy 48) of the South, which Glasgow directs towards a critique of the settlers of the land, bearers of the traditional values still present in Pedlar's Mill. In the introductory pages, describing the origins of the territory, Glasgow makes an ironic critique of the country's society. She condemns the early settlers of Virginia, including Dorinda's ancestor, who is ironically named John "Calvin" Abernathy (4). The narrator explains that by denominating themselves as members of the "good families," the first settlers of Virginia distinguished themselves from the settlers who came later, namely Virginians, whom they rebaptized as the "good people" (4). The families of the early settlers justified this class difference by holding high their values of righteousness, which came from their aristocratic "blue blood" and because they brought the "vigorous fear of God in their hearts" (4). By providing this historical background of the village where the story is set, Ellen Glasgow suggests, according to Pamela R. Matthews, that the legacy of Pedlar's Mill is based on a principle of determination derived directly from the religious faith of the ancestors, which only served to mask a strong "cultural imposition" whereby they sought to "convince others that their status [was] natural" (157). Matthews contends that Pedlar's Mill believed in a form of biological and cultural determinism derived from religious beliefs, which masked their own hierarchical impositions and biases as naturally and morally superior

simply by virtue of their religious motifs. Through her critical and ironic description of the mentality of Pedlar's Mill's founding fathers, Glasgow criticizes the theory of predestination, which acts as an obstacle not only to the middle-class families of the "good people," or those who came later, described as new settlers able to cultivate the land just "for a season or two" (4), but also to the women, since at Pedlar's Mill it was the responsibility of the male children to maintain the hegemony of the "old men" as inheritance of Pedlar's Mill (Matthews 158). Glasgow indulges in irony upon Dorinda's ancestor, explaining that while he sold fifty slaves in the South, he then used the money of the "black flesh" for the "redemption of black souls in the Congo" (6). In this sense, Glasgow seems to criticize the hypocrisy of the Presbyterian faith of Protestant settlers in Virginia, which makes men "doubly oppressive tenets of slaveholding and missionary zeal," enabling "a view of others as needing 'redemption,'" forming part of the heritage of Pedlar's Mill (Matthews 158), and therefore a dimension Dorinda has to face and challenge to fulfil her ultimate dream. Through this initial description, Glasgow determines the critical trajectory of the novel. The ideal of predestination and patriarchal hierarchy, another element criticized in the novel, is further ironized by the fact that it is Eudora Oakley who inherits Abernathy's lands, and not the aristocratic settler's son, who dies falling out of a tree. The author aims to show the hypocrisy of the aristocratic class of Pedlar's Mill, and thus of the "Old" South, by denouncing its traditionalist values linked to Virginia's determinism and restrictions. Glasgow's aim is to counter the idea of predestination typical of Presbyterianism by allowing a woman to change the fate of her destiny.

Despite Glasgow's criticism of the values of the past and the traditions of Pedla''s Mill, even in Glasgow's outspoken condemnation of empty convention and restrictive society, there is in *Barren Ground* a "praise for the enduring values of land, blood, and tradition" (Caldwell 206), which is manifested mainly in the centrality of the concept of land and in the "characters struggling to recover a regional identity" (Caldwell 206), albeit mythical and idealized. This emerges from the "kinship with the country" (Glasgow 50), which Dorinda inherits from her father, and which binds her

inextricably to the land. It is because of her belonging to the land and of her origins that she eventually manages to fulfil her dreams. For Inés Casas Maroto, what gives Dorinda her sense of independence and allows her to escape the futility of her father's life is her "realization that she has inherited good traits from her father as well as her mother", namely "the determination to overcome and rise above obstacles" (103), which characterizes Eudora Oakley, and the "hard-working" (103) character of his father, whose work is however ineffectual. Her Episcopalian mother and Presbyterian father pass on to Dorinda their valuable traits, as family ties and teachings allow her to succeed in farming. Her heritage and bond to Southern traditions however show her "conflicted southern identity" (Casas Maroto 98), which frames Glasgow's novel within numerous dualisms. This connection to the land and the values of Glasgow's past emerges through the evocation of memories and reminiscences of her homeland. As her connection with the Southern Agrarians deepens, in Glasgow's *Barren Ground* (1925) the protagonist increasingly seems to rely on memories of an archaic rural dimension to give meaning and purpose to their lives. In this way, Glasgow reaffirms "the traditional values of history and myth as her bulwarks against the chaos of the modern world" (Caldwell 203). This celebration of Southern values and traditions, though tempered by irony, connected Glasgow's writing to a regional literary heritage. In New York, Dorinda makes the acquaintance of Mr. Burch, whom the good Dr Faraday hopes will win her over. At a music concert Dorinda attends with Dr. Burch, the music Dorinda hears causes her to take her memory and spirit back to Pedlar's Mill:

> "Suddenly, while she struggled over the letters, the music floated toward her from the cool twilight of the distance. This was not music, she thought in surprise, but the sound of a storm coming up through the tall pines at Old Farm. She had heard this singing melody a thousand times, on autumn afternoons, in the woods. Then, as it drew nearer, the harmony changed from sound into sensation; and from pure sensation, rippling in wave after wave like a river, it was merged and lost in her consciousness" (Glasgow 184)

There follows a description of idealistic and romanticized images of the landscape of Pedlar's Mill, suggesting Glasgow's adherence to the evocation of a mythical past typical of the Southern literature

of the period. Furthermore, the text states that thanks to such memories, “something that she had thought dead was coming to life again”, something that “[she’s] got to stand” (Glasgow 185), as if referring both to her love for Jason, which she had long since buried, and to her desire to return. In the following chapter, Dorinda continues to think of Pedlar’s Mill, as if she were mysteriously bound to it (“I feel as if the farm were calling to me to come back and help it”, Glasgow 188). The celebration of the South occurs in this sense through the representation of two opposing perceptions of the concert music. While Dorinda is overwhelmed by the music and her response to the concert includes a synesthetic revocation of images, sounds, colors and memories, Dr. Burch remains detached. “I never get that response to music. To me it is little more than an intellectual exercise”, he tells her. Here, the difference between the “alienated city dweller” and the “happy primitive” is evident, according to Lutz (155). Through this contrast, Glasgow may aim to enhance the importance of the mythic imaginary of the land; Dorinda's return to the past, to the images of her land, seem to evoke the idea of the South as personal heritage. Moreover, in choosing her heroine from the descendants of Calvinist farmers in rural Piedmont Virginia, Glasgow enlists character and setting in the service of a poetic vision of a renewed South, for Dorinda “embodies the imagination and creative energy which Glasgow prescribed for the salvation of the South itself” (Bond 567). Eventually, Dorinda decides to return to Pedlar’s Mill, driven by a desire to take over Old Farm and make it a dairy farm to produce butter (“[...] if I had the money [...] I’d buy some cows from James Ellgood, some of his Jerseys, and try to set up a dairy farm, a very little one, but I wouldn’t let anybody touch the milk and butter except Mother and myself” Glasgow 190-191). In fact, according to Lutz, one of the ways in which the city allows Dorinda to change her perspective, and thus prompts her to return, is the renewed vision of her land, namely a “urban-based, urban-derived vision of the rural” (156), where she can actually produce something through the investment of capital, a notion typically associated with the environment of the city and modernity. Thanks to the knowledge acquired in the city, she manages to renew her skills and make the land fertile, something her father had never managed to do. In fact, the capitalist reinvigoration of her parents’ farm allows her not only to avoid an unhappy fate for her

family's land, but also to buy the Greylocks' farm and renovate it, a symbol of a "caricature of plantation life" (Lutz 156). In the context of the contrast between the North and the South, this melding of city and country, as Lutz defines it, might suggest an "integration" (156) of modernity with the countryside, allowing Dorinda to have the appropriate modern knowledge to return to Pedlar's Mill and reinvigorate the family business.

Even if according to this reading one could conceive of a solution between modernity and tradition, the text remains dense with changes. The text constantly shifts between "pastoral beauty to rural idiocy, from urban knowledge and possibility to urban angst and futility" (Lutz 156). We have to keep in mind that the regionalism of the South, like that of the Agrarians to which Glasgow belonged, opposed homogenizing industrialization as the latter destroyed culture, which only existed in places far from the world of machines and modernity (Lutz 101). However, when Dorinda returns to Pedlar's Mill with her renewed idea of rural life, she finds "not integration, but incredible emptiness" (Lutz 157) to disappoint her expectations and idealizations. Throughout the course of the story, the land challenges Dorinda's hope to make the soil fertile, but at the same time gives her the strength she needs to resist and proceed with her goal, as if she were tied to the spirit of the land ("The storm and the hag-ridden dreams of the night were over, and the land which she had forgotten was waiting to take her back to its heart. Endurance. Fortitude. The spirit of the land was flowing into her, and her own spirit, strengthened and refreshed, was flowing out again toward life." Glasgow 408).

As we have seen so far, the text allows us to follow Dorinda Oakley's psychological journey through love, trauma, tragedy, despair, recovery and the desire to return to her homeland, driven by the revolutionary hope of challenging Pedlar's Mill's hereditary system, which excludes those who come from a lower social class. However, hers is not an outright revolt against traditional values, as Dorinda remains deeply attached to the land. This bond is evidenced by the numerous episodes in which, far from home, she thinks about how to revive Old Farm and build a business of her own, acquiring new land. It is precisely this indissoluble connection with the land that eventually prompts

her to return to the village, armed with new knowledge about herself and with skills she learned in the city to manage the farm's economy. On the one hand, Dorinda's character symbolizes a stark contrast to the "Old" South, represented by decadent characters like Doctor Greylock and his son. Ellen Glasgow proposes an alternative to it, offering a renewed vision through a female character capable of exceeding the expectations set by her gender. Through the doctrine of realism, Glasgow "rejected the convention of idealizing the past and romanticizing the present" (Becker 296), presenting a text full of ambivalences, consisting of a decrepit and immoral past and a sterile modernity disassociated from the mythical reality of Virginia, which however remain unresolved. According to Bond, "the pastoral landscape has represented an ideal terrain, a poetic metaphor for a state of mind in which the visionary's longings for a lost harmony, simplicity, stability, and beauty are fulfilled in a setting remote from the complexities and corruptive influences of civilization" (565). Glasgow demonstrates a nostalgic longing for a mythical past glory through Dorinda's decision to return, but Dorinda manages to rebuild the farm not through the working methods of the past, but through the modern techniques she has learned. This integration symbolizes for her the desire to find a link between past and present, returning to the village with notions acquired in the city that allow her to create a new notion of the South.

This new vision may indicate a rejection of the old plantation tradition in favor of constructing a myth of the South in a female imaginary, where the conventions of heredity give way to meritocracy. More importantly, by placing a woman as householder and business owner, after rejecting marriage, love, and pregnancy, Ellen Glasgow presents a story that calls into question gender roles in a South still tied to myth and traditional, restrictive values. Glasgow attempts to provide a realistic portrait that a counter-reacts to the fiction that eulogized the antebellum South (Rusak 67), but without renouncing the "presentness" (Caldwell 204) of the past, a trait typical of the Southern Renaissance and also relevant to Ellen Glasgow. The presence of the past as a mythical place and as a form of heritage allows the protagonist to return to her homeland with new self-awareness, enabling her to

endure the trauma she suffered when she was twenty. However, this ambivalence, that is "never totally resolved" (Casas Maroto 99), or coexistence, between the promise of a New South and the obstacles imposed by the Old South, may explain the protagonist's choice to return to the countryside, despite her initial decision to reject a married life and live in an industrialized city, far from the customs of an outdated society.

3.2 Ellen Glasgow's Revision of Womanhood: The Bond Between the Woman and the Land, the Rejection of Marriage and Alternative Relationships

Ellen Glasgow places a woman at the center of *Barren Ground*, a novel set against the backdrop of a mythical yet decaying South. This setting allows Glasgow to critically examine the social systems of Southern villages, which remain tied to strict traditions and religious beliefs. The rules of inheritance, combined with male hegemonic power within the family, typically hinder female independence and force women to view marriage as their only source of economic support (Scott 299). In this cultural context, the plantation tradition popularized the "Southern Belle" as the emblematic female character of an idealized antebellum South, where women were economically dependent on their husbands and had little more freedom than the black slaves on the plantations. By positioning a free woman in this context, Glasgow strategically calls into question the role imposed on women by tradition, which often relegates them to being mothers and wives. Through Dorinda's personal and psychological experience, Glasgow offers an alternative to the typical expectations of Southern women. Her critique is evident in the criticism of the hereditary system that centers property and household authority around men, typically excluding outsiders, including women (Matthews 158). In *Barren Ground*, Glasgow also challenges the "cult of Southern womanhood" and conventional gender roles, establishing herself as a precursor of the feminist tradition in Southern literature (Rusak 67). Moreover, her portrayal of the modernizing South captures the tensions present

in early twentieth-century Southern consciousness, marking Glasgow as an astute observer of social change (Rusak 67).

Dorinda's story presents the restrictions placed on women within Southern families with harsh realism. The cultural imperatives of the time and place certainly did not encourage women's development. For Pamela R. Matthews, just as modern agricultural methods, even those considered avant-garde in the bleak 1890s, had not reached this sparsely populated part of Virginia, modern ideas had similarly failed to provide the fertile ground necessary for the New Woman of Pedlar's Mill to flourish (158). Within this restrictive framework, Glasgow enacts a true reinterpretation of the woman figure through the landscape also representing a new relationship between women and nature. In many novels of the Southern literary tradition the land is seen as a mythic garden of Eden that sees women as the "flower of an aristocratic garden" (Harrison 47). In this antebellum-inspired dimension, womanhood became representative of a virgin land, and therefore something that the Southern male had to preserve and protect from intruders (Harrison 47-48). In *Barren Ground*, however, Ellen Glasgow seems to offer an alternative to the agrarian myth, proposing a pastoral revision that poses the woman as a heroine in search of self-determination and self-fulfillment, without a mediating - and prevailing - male figure. This finds resolution in the female character fulfilling her "pastoral vision" (Bond 567) of building a dairy farm on her own. To do this, Glasgow intrinsically ties the female character to the land, but not as a passive element to be preserved, but as an active element acting upon nature. Indeed, Dorinda is emotionally, spiritually, and psychologically connected to the land; she is the one who can ultimately make the soil fertile again, thanks to her knowledge, her talent and her self-sacrifice. According to Tanya Ann Kennedy, the female subject is intrinsically tied to nature as this relation is "subjective, romantic, and rooted in the cycles of cultivation" (49). She also points out that "her sexual awakening comes with the plantings of spring" and "her expected marriage to Jason is to occur in the fall, during the harvest time" (49). This co-dependence between woman and nature and the merging of romance plot and agrarian plot mean that "the land acts as canvas and

mirror for Dorinda's newly awakened sexuality, providing her with a sense of agency" (49), which may suggest that Glasgow wanted the woman "to draw identity from the land rather than be symbolic of it" (Harrison 49). Nature does not represent Dorinda, but rather her inner life: Dorinda's internal struggles follow the subsequent seasons, and she lives her subjectivity just as nature. According to Mary Castiglie Anderson, Glasgow finds a solution for the renewed identity between woman and nature by "isolating the maternal archetype in the land itself" (387). Anderson explains this claiming that "though Dorinda, in order to become self-determining and autonomous, must deny her personal biology, becoming, in fact, sexually frigid, she maintains the association with the creative principle by her association with nature" (387). Therefore, by overcoming the sterility of the land, she overcomes the dominating principle of Fate, subverting the old religious ideologies of the Old South according to which a woman could inherit a land just through marriage, and therefore, the union with a man. By identifying herself with the land and finding her salvation through it, she reclaims her own "feminine" principle (Anderson 387-388). Essentially, her fate is determined by the interplay between her personal strength, that makes her question the old values and leave the farm, and the strength she obtains from nature, namely the outer environment, to which she is intrinsically tied. It is this last relationship that eventually leads her to decide to return to Pedlar's Mill and fulfill her dreams.

A new redefinition of the role of Southern women is also given by the "revision of the romantic plot" (Harrison 57), which was so central in pastoral fiction and that portrayed the female character's ultimate fulfillment through marriage rather than through work. Indeed, instead of completely removing the male character from the scene to allow the female protagonist to develop autonomously (Harrison 57) Glasgow decides to have Dorinda avoid marriage by leaving Pedlar's Mill, allowing her to develop her independence elsewhere. In this way, Glasgow challenges the southern ideology that dictated women could only achieve autonomy in society through marriage, albeit always subject to their husbands' control. By transforming the forms of gender relationship, Glasgow somehow criticizes and dismisses the traditional values of marriage that southern women

typically inherited from previous generations of women. In the novel, Dorinda's mother, Eudora Oakley, epitomizes a generation who had to find marriage as a way of independence. Her "self-sacrificing personality endorsed by traditional values" makes her a "domestic servant who clings to religion and family reputation for solace against her difficult life as a farm wife" (Seidel 288). Although Eudora explains to Dorinda that Joshua Oakley has never made her "unhappy" (Glasgow 34), she realized throughout the years that "romance in her life, after the death of the young missionary in the Congo, had turned toward her religion" (Glasgow 35), as the only way to escape Pedlar's Mill environment, which eventually destined her to overwhelming dissipation and poverty, as well as to mental instability which will forever make her feel "lost" (Glasgow 35). The character of Eudora, who is trapped in a dissipating south, might be Glasgow's attempt to portray a dimension in which there was no recourse except marriage. Many times, in the novel Dorinda asks her mother about the reasons why people fall in love and get married, to which Eudora does not seem to be able to provide a reason ("A mild regret dickered into the face of the older woman. 'I s'pose they think they've got one'" Glasgow 79), and at the same time it emerges that, unlike previous generations of women, Dorinda questions this topic trying to find a meaning for marriage, recognizing she and her mother have different desires and views of it ("She must have been educated to refinements of taste and niceties of manner; yet marriage had been too strong lor her, and had conquered her" Glasgow 79). In this sense, Mrs. Oakley represents the old conception of femininity and women's role in traditional Southern households. Moreover, the mental breakdown Eudora goes through, which eventually leads her to death, may also symbolize the crisis of the idea of marriage and the destiny of women trapped in it. With regards to Dorinda's unintended but suffered choice to avoid marriage, there are elements that highlight Glasgow's distancing from the Southern-Belle type and the romantic plot. Glasgow's thematic proposition of Dorinda acquiring the Greylock's' land with her own strength and economic assets, challenges the Southern tradition based on male determinism and inheritance. Since the only way she could have acquired the Greylock land is through marriage, with the change of plot and the loss of her illegitimate son this should have been no longer possible. However, Dorinda

manages to transcend the limits imposed by the rules of the legitimacy of the land, which she loses the moment she loses Jason's child, by buying the Greylock's' land. Dorinda Oakley should either "repent or seek vengeance" (Wagner 555), but instead of doing that, she searches for new options in the city, using her inner strength and talent "in ways her culture does not recognise as acceptable for a woman" (Wagner 555). She flees the farm, goes to the city, gets access to knowledge that would typically be available for men, learns about new farming methods and technologies, as well as notions of economy, and comes back to the land, where she belongs.

The definition of a new womanhood in Glasgow's novel is also obtained through the contrast between Dorinda and the male figures of the novel, who are either weak, unsuccessful and inadequate to carry on the heritage of the South, despite the fact that this task is normally intended for men. In Glasgow's works, the characters of the male aristocracy "always lack moral fibre" and when they do not, they are usually represented as having a "foolhardy emotionalism" (Becker 297). For instance, the principle of inheritance is rendered futile by the fact that Joshua Oakley, Dorinda's father, despite his hard work, is unable to make the land profitable. Moreover, in Glasgow's fiction, male characters often seem to "read their own mental state into their surroundings" (Harrison 52). Jason Greylock jilts Dorinda to marry another aristocratic woman under family pressures, since Dorinda belonged to a lower social class. In the novel, we witness the decay of the Greylock properties, which parallels the physical and psychological decay of Jason, ravaged by alcohol. Jason suffers, like Dorinda's parents, the limitations of the environment and inheritance of Pedlar's Mill, as well as the misfortune of fate; in addition to having lost his wife, Geneva Ellgood, to suicide, Jason, "too emasculated by heredity and environment to struggle against a sorry fate" (Bond 570), like his father dies a victim of alcoholism and seems to have inherited all his weaknesses. Old Doctor Greylock, who together with Jason represents the old aristocracy of Pedlar's Mill, apart from having illegitimate children with his black servant Idabella ("There are a lot of Idabella's mulatto children still hanging about Five Oaks", Glasgow 381) never succeeded in making Five Oaks flourish because of his addiction to alcohol

("The doctor had been a man of parts and rural prominence in his day; but the land and scarcity of labour had worn on his nerves, and he was now slowly drinking himself to death, attended, beyond the social shadow-line, by an anonymous brood of mulatto offspring", Glasgow 4). Dr. Greylock represents the old regime in this sense; he lives in a dilapidated house, surrounded by black slaves and mulatto children, a relic of the plantation myth, outdated for Glasgow, together with a son who is supposed to represent the future of the South. But Jason Graylock in the novel is an example of Southern aristocracy now inadequate and incapable of action. Nathan Pedlar is another important character in the context of the relationship between Dorinda and male characters in the novel. In what concerns marriage and sexuality, Dorinda's decision to marry Nathan is based on a "contract whereby both parties improve their economic status, keep their autonomy and are not attached by the sexual roles of husband and wife" (Lado-Pazos 89). Indeed, Nathan is conceived in the novel almost as a means by which Dorinda can finally acquire new land. Dorinda would never have wanted to marry him, since for her "There could be no drearier lot, she imagined, than marriage with Nathan for a husband" (Glasgow 68), but she eventually agrees to marry him out of piety and only on condition of celibacy. Nathan is used as an economic and psychological means to overcome Dorinda's obstacles in obtaining Old Farm. Nathan's wealth, which consists of numerous mortgages, allows Dorinda to implement her 'revenge' against Jason by acquiring his land. Nathan, however, often serves as "strong partner to help her achieve permanence for her ideal" (Bond 571). The only moment of profound tenderness and "gentleness" between the two occurs one evening when Dorinda finally recognizes the meaning of their union following the acquisition of the Greylock lands, which represents for her the ultimate dream ("They talked until late, planning changes in the old farm and improvements in the new one. It was an evening that she liked to remember as long as she lived. Whenever she looked back on it afterwards, it seemed to lie there like a fertile valley in the arid monotony of her life.", 306). Dorinda's "evolution from apathy […] to tenderness" (Lado-Pazos 89) for Nathan could indicate an alternative to the classic marriage relationship and suggest that friendship and deep respect can exist between man and woman.

In her works, Ellen Glasgow represents a "New Woman" capable of "thrive outside of the traditional heterosexual marriage" (Marchant 68) by forming a friendship with another woman: Fluvanna. Following the death of her mother, Dorinda is left alone in the family house with her black maid. A deep bond grows between them, described by Dorinda as an affection that "had outgrown the slender tie of mistress and maid, and had become as strong and elastic as the bond that holds relatives together" (Glasgow 270). In these terms, this relationship transcends the boundaries between white mistress and black female servant, which in the plantation tradition, albeit sweetened, set hierarchical and racist boundaries, to the point of becoming almost a family bond. This relation could have a distinctly feminist reading, as it challenges the intolerance and the hereditary, misogynistic – as well as racist – system of Pedlar's Mill. Dorinda and Fluvanna's friendship seems to transcend the village's "racism, misogyny, and heterosexism" (Matthews qtd. in Lado-Pazos, 90). Matthews furtherly enlightens the importance of this relationship in the novel by analyzing its problematics within the context of the literary representation of racial relationships. Glasgow does not really manage to deviate from Fluvanna's "cheerful" image of the "happy darkey" in the plantation tradition. Moreover, Dorinda feels for Fluvanna an "inherited feeling of condescension" (Glasgow 270). Glasgow distances herself from Dorinda as she shows that racism has temporarily been "transcended" in the two women's relationship (Elizabeth Schultz qtd. in Matthews 161). In this sense, Dorinda can't really escape the old values of Pedlar's Mill and the tradition she inherited. At the same time, this communal, feminine bonding between the two can be read from a more feminist perspective as Glasgow, through this relationship, evokes a "nurturing tradition of female community" (Matthews 161) which represents an inclusive alternative to the oppression experienced by white and black women in Pedlar's Mill.

Dorinda's talent and strength lead her to achieve her dream of building a dairy farm and becoming a prosperous, female landowner, making the land fertile again. However, her story is also that of a woman convinced that she can find joy only in her land. Dorinda is forced to live childless

and without a family, as though there were a price to pay for success, seeming unaffected by desertion, because in order to accept life, she has had to create a world where she can live alone. For this reason, she has to be considered both a "victor" and a "victim" (Julius Rowan Raper qtd. in Dorothy M. Scura et. Al 158). The price of Dorinda's success, which Glasgow seems to have felt was inevitable, is that she must live joylessly. She is also constantly in conflict with her inner life, which manifests through her struggle with the soil. For most of her life, we see Dorinda spend much of her energy trying to forget her love for Jason, which she can never really overcome despite repeating she's "finished with all that" (Glasgow 191), which we never truly believe. In this sense, the motives that eventually make her come back to Pedlar's Mill are clearly, for Dorothy M. Scura, "the positive ones of renewing the barren fields of Old Farm" and "revivifying her own suspended emotional life" (et. Al 156).

In conclusion, through Dorinda, Glasgow may have wanted to offer a new image of a "new Southern woman", one that actively manages to dominate over the power of nature without the help of any man. Dorinda is, however, endlessly emotionally drained by her love delusion, which offers a negative view of the fate of women who stray from marriage. The price for being a new Southern woman is high for Dorinda. Throughout her life, she represses her desires and emotions, which, even though they help her build a business, prevent her from fully experiencing her youth. It might be Glasgow's way of demonstrating that for a woman to succeed, she must necessarily sacrifice something, in this case, motherhood, family, and love. It is as if Glasgow wants to show that despite renouncing the hereditary impositions of her society, a woman cannot be both professionally emancipated and find romantic and sexual fulfilment. Dorinda, although economically independent, chooses to live a frigid life, where her inner 'barrenness' corresponds to the dryness of the soil due to her bond with nature. In this sense, the "barren ground" should be understood as the "patriarchally controlled and transmitted figurative landscape" (Matthews 166) – namely the ideology and culture – against which Dorinda and other women are forced to define themselves and envision their destinies. Through Dorinda, who in fact "*is* the barren ground" (Matthews 160), Ellen Glasgow offers

new alternatives to women that overcome the traditional values imposed on them. Dorinda's return to the farm and her ability to overcome the 'barrennes' of the soil can be understood as a way to overcome not only patriarchy and the religious determinism embedded in the hereditary system but also racially and heterosexually imposed values. Moreover, by denying her personal biology and becoming sexually frigid, "she maintains the association with the creative principle by her association with nature" (Anderson 387). Glasgow, through the character of Dorinda Oakley, proposes a change in gender roles and a new image of the woman. She offers an alternative to the typical romantic plot of Southern traditions and the typical endings of female plots. This change occurs thematically through the rejection of marriage and the decision to leave. The protagonist's return, instead, highlights a re-evocation of the importance of nature and the connection to the land, which is the trigger that brings Dorinda back to Pedlar's Mill. This connection with the land is transformed by Glasgow into a gendered key to provide a new identity for the "New Woman". This renewed Southern female identity allows Ellen Glasgow to have Dorinda Oakley emerge not despite being a woman, but *because* she is a woman.

CHAPTER FOUR

ENTRAPMENT AND THE QUEST FOR SELF-DETERMINATION IN *QUICKSAND*

4.1 Helga Crane's Journey: The Emancipatory Potential of Black Female Mobility and the Complex "*Synthesis*" of Identities

In the early 20th century, the U.S. transitioned from a rural to an industrial nation, as the plantation economic system collapsed and the western frontier closed. In this context, The Great Migration North, a massive movement of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North which began as early as the late 1870s and culminated between 1910 and 1930 (Marks 148), was a crucial factor in altering the demographic landscape of northern cities during the 1920s, particularly New York, where Harlem became a cultural epicenter (Britannica). As African Americans relocated to cities like New York, they searched for better economic opportunities and escape from the oppressive racial segregation of the South. This migration significantly reinforced regional identities and created conditions for rethinking African American identity (Berke et al., "The Harlem Renaissance"), as it also brought together a diverse and vibrant community of artists, writers, musicians, and intellectuals, fostering an environment of cultural innovation and expression. The Harlem Renaissance was for African Americans one of the most prolific movements in terms of artistic and intellectual activity.

In the 1920s, African American authors worked to provide a new definition of blackness through the figure of the "New Negro". The figure of the "New Negro" was meant to represent black people as liberated from the "yoke of racial prejudice that equated blackness with barbarism" (Dawahare 22) and proud of their race and heritage. Many writers believed that this racial reassessment would

improve the perception of black Americans by whites and hoped that the production of black culture would help African Americans gain long-awaited respect in the United States and abroad (Dawahare 22). For black authors of the Harlem Renaissance, it was crucial to promote racial uplift and dignity for black individuals, who were socially and culturally subjected to white superiority. Segregation concretized the oppressive environment for black people in America, keeping them separated from whites and in a position of inferiority in the public sphere. It is within this cultural context that Nella Larsen sets *Quicksand* (1928). We witness Helga Crane's relentless displacements, reflecting her ongoing quest for self-identification. Helga is a 23-year-old mulatto woman who teaches at an all-girls boarding school in Naxos, in the South, where she constantly faces white superiority and segregation. Seeking her identity within the black community, she flees to Harlem, only to find its streets vibrant, but confining, with the friends she makes there unwelcoming about her white heritage. She then decides to seek happiness and identity overseas. She flees to Europe, moving to Copenhagen to stay with her relatives. Unfortunately, the Danish relatives and the white society there offer no more freedom than she experienced in America; they see her as an exotic, fetishized object, and they are far from accepting her. Feeling the need to reconnect with her roots, she returns to Harlem, almost hoping to marry the man she loves, Dr. Anderson, the new African American principal of the Naxos boarding school where Helga worked. However, Anderson's attraction to her proves to be merely an impulsive desire, leaving Helga feeling further objectified. She then decides to marry Reverend Pleasant Green and move to a small southern village in Alabama. Here, Helga becomes trapped in a marriage with several babies, marking her ultimate capitulation.

Helga Crane, in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, is relentlessly caught between America's inexorable contradictions. As a mulatto woman, she is on a constant quest for self-identification, in a world polarized by racial differences, the legacy of slavery and segregation. In order to make sense of her biracial identity, Crane traverses borders and navigates diverse communities to make meaning for her identity. Her tumultuous journey underscores her constant displacement and profound sense

of nonbelonging, highlighting the tragic complexities of her existence and the period in which she lives. Crane's geographical movement reflects the historical flowing of black people from South to North, as well as the intellectual and artistic relations between African American and European artists across borders. This context constitutes essential characteristics of modernism (Scheper 683), which frames Nella Larsen's novel. Moreover, cultural and literary interests that were flourishing during the early 20th century among middle-class bourgeoisie intellectuals prompted Nella Larsen to reimagine a new narrative for mulatto women. However, the protagonist of her novel does not seem to find a place, as she is rejected by both white and black communities. The story of Helga Crane expands to boundaries that are outside of the United States of America. Her choice to set part of the story in Copenhagen recalls her personal experience, but it is also an attempt to investigate possible options for Helga. By placing Helga in different geographical locations and racial communities, Larsen seems to want to explore how different cultures perceive biracial women (Walker 174).

In the novel there is an inevitable confrontation between Helga's bourgeois desires, her biracial identity and the opportunities she can afford. Larsen investigates the complexity of Helga's mixed-race condition in the context of early 20th century America through the image of the "Tragic Mulatta", a literary and cultural archetype that sees a biracial woman torn between two "opposing" identities (Bennett 580), which for Helga are the African American and the white. Being the daughter of a white woman from Denmark and a black West Indian father, she is the product of miscegenation. Jeanne Scheper sees this literary convention as "a melodramatic form in which the mixed-race character is seen as a split subject, tragically flawed by 'nature' and trapped in a narrative trajectory inevitably leading to rejection or death" (680), which is exactly what happens at the end of the novel. However, Scheper also enlightens the possibility of meaning in Helga's constant wandering, as her acts of displacement might be seen as "a site for becoming a subject" (685). Rafael Walker seems to concur with Scheper when he affirms that Crane's mobility may have, to a certain extent, an emancipatory potential (174). The possibility of Helga's emancipation through her passing clashes

however with the ending of the novel, which sees Helga renouncing to pursue opportunities of identification in the urban, although still oppressive, environment, for a life in the South as child bearer.

Crane's movements can be seen as representative of the possibilities available to educated black women in the 1920s (Scheper 683) and how they navigated modern societies. Despite the freedom of her geographical movement is only superficial, as it is triggered by a sense of non-belonging, her constant search for opportunities has emancipatory roots, as she refuses to accept the inadequacy imposed on her by the communities around her.

Her freedom is, according to many critics, linked to a modernist vision of black women. Jeanne Scheper reinterprets Larsen's character by identifying her with the figure of the black female *flâneuse*, a woman who explores and observes different realities and holds the "promise of moving away from, into, and between communities and locations" (679). Scheper notes that Nella Larsen "situates her characters in urban, rural, and transnational terrains in order to explore how women's experience of modernity is shaped by negotiating race, gender, and sexuality against the delineations of segregation, regionalism, and nationality" (680). In this sense, Scheper believes that Nella Larsen tried to show how black women experience modernity within urban-based societies, consumerism and racial barriers, which may affect African American women and their identity. According to Dawahare, the theme of mobility in *Quicksand* is closely linked to Helga Crane's "commercial value" (Larsen qtd. in Dawahare 35) and her exaggerated visibility. With the money provided by her uncle to go to Copenhagen, Helga is able to move physically, but this mobility is never completely free. Although the money allows her to travel, it also makes her a product of capitalism; she circulates just like money (Dawahare 25) supporting the belief that she is not truly free, as she remains dependent on a system that exploits blacks. According to some critics, her movement can be seen as freedom in a positive way. In her trajectory, Helga Crane represents movement "as a mode of agency" (Scheper 680) and a way of "coming into subjectivity" (Scheper 680). Indeed, Helga Crane's movements from

place to place, from community to community, although driven by profound dissatisfaction, underline a sort of motivation, despite the limits she acknowledges, to find her own dimension. Her point of departure is Naxos, which, curiously, is an anagram of "Saxon", as Hostetler notes (38). Here, Crane has to adapt to oppressive restraints imposed by whites and values that make black people a "'machine' of dull conformity" (Hostetler 38). Larsen explores racial identity in Naxos as a product of "capitalist political economy" (Dawahare 25), where under the rules of Taylorism, black people are subjected to exploitative relations legitimized by discipline and service (Dawahare 26). Helga Crane is conscious about the exploitative and hypocritical environment in which she lives, and several times indulges in thoughts of disapproval and acts of rebellion, which may reflect her quest for individuality. In this sense, Helga can be framed within the emancipatory desire to free herself from this oppressive environment. Resigning from her job in Harlem and breaking up the engagement with James Vale, for instance, show Crane's independent potential. Because of her constant movement towards autonomy, Crane embodies the essence of a modernist woman who refuses to conform to predefined narratives for a black woman, finding through mobility a sort of identity as a "woman-in-motion" (Schepler 686). Since the very beginning of the novel, she refuses to conform, for instance, to racial norms. Black people are expected to wear dull colors such as navy blue, black or gray, but she believes that black people would look good in bright colors ("Helga Crane, a despised mulatto, but something intuitive, some unanalyzed driving spirit of loyalty to the inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colors were fitting and that dark-complexioned people should wear yellow, green, and red. Black, brown, and gray were ruinous to them, actually destroyed the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins." Larsen 38). Helga is fed up with the hypocrisy of the boarding school where she works, as the staff tries to portray white culture as superior while masking discrimination and prejudice towards black students with a false interest in racial progress. Helga is enraged when Miss MacGooden, the dormitory matron, scolds students for behaving unladylike, telling them to "act like ladies and not like savages from the backwoods" (Larsen 26), not realizing that most of the students are indeed from culturally undeveloped backgrounds. Another emblematic

scene of white superiority occurs during a lunch sermon when the white preacher at the school, with a paternalistic and insincere tone, praises the African American race with faked admiration, asserting it was the only race that had made “so much progress” in such a short time, but urged them to “know where to stop” (Larsen 6), implying that African Americans must respect the boundaries imposed by the superior white race. Helga is inevitably tired of white supremacy disguised by paternalism, prompting her journey through various communities to begin.

When Helga decides to go to Harlem, she does so with the hope to connect with black society, in order to feel included as a biracial woman. Larsen delineates through the vivid background of the city a modern world, with Harlem being an “aesthetic space that challenges representations of the effects of modernity that do not account for the interactions of race, class and gender” (Scheper 688). As she arrives in Harlem, she finds the city “had welcomed her [...] into something that was [...] peace and contentment” (Larsen 94). Indeed, in New York, where she finds a vibrant black community, she “posits Harlem as a place of lesser visibility compared to Naxos” (Gray 261). Indeed, in the city Helga’s sense of “oppression”, “loneliness” and “isolation” (Larsen 99) which had accompanied her throughout her existence, seem to have ceased. She is content with her job as secretary, and fascinated by the city’s landscape, artistic activity and city-dwellers. But her happiness is ill-fated. She starts going through “moments of overwhelming anguish” (Larsen 103) until a “sensation of estrangement and isolation” (Larsen 104) encompasses her. Helga hopes to overcome conservative Naxos and seek individualism in Harlem, but her rebellion against the city’s oppression just ends up exacerbating her condition: her “non-conformity” inevitably leads to “non-belonging” (Walker 160). She starts to be bothered by the wealthy black middle-class bourgeoisie which she hangs out with, such as people like her friend Anne Grey. Before going to Harlem, Mrs. Hayes-Rore, to which she had found job as maid, had advised her to present herself to Mrs. Anne Grey, her niece, as not having white relatives (“I wouldn’t mention that my people are white, if I were you”, Larsen 91). This is because Harlem’s black bourgeoisie despise the white race; her friend Anne gives vent to her disapproval of interracial relationships when talking about Audrey Denney, a biracial woman they see at a social event with

Dr. Anderson, defining her a “disgusting creature” (Larsen 132) who should be “ostracized” (Larsen 133) for having relationships with white men. As a biracial woman herself, Helga feels even more as a racial intruder. As the other friends that are with Anne sustain her disapproval, the inclusion to which Helga is initially exposed, paradoxically becomes a “radical exclusion” (Walker 172), since she does not feel accepted by the African American community. In Harlem, her sense of non-belonging is exacerbated by a sense of confusion when she acknowledges the link between art and culture and “the self-denial involved in rejecting the art forms of one's own culture in favour of those of another” (Hostetler 39). Helga is able to see the contradictions of Harlem society through the character of Anne; while she demonstrates a radical repudiation for people with white heritage, at the same time she praises white culture:

> “[Anne] hated white people with a deep and burning hatred [...] But she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race. Toward these things she showed only a disdainful contempt, tinged sometimes with a faint amusement. [...] Theoretically, however, she stood for the immediate advancement of all things Negroid, and was in revolt against social inequality.” (Larsen 107).

While Anne is very explicit about her dislike for whites and her celebration of black culture, which also echoes the values of the Harlem Renaissance, she nevertheless imitates the way they dress, speak, and live, implying that, to a certain extent, their culture is preferable - or even superior - to black culture. In this sense, by portraying a contradictory black female character, who praises black culture while mimicking whites to feel valuable, Larsen problematizes the perception of African Americans concerning their image, which is inevitably influenced by white culture and the racist projections of whites. The author creates a character who cannot completely relinquish the belief in white superiority. Due to the anti-white sentiments and the hypocrisies pervading black Harlem’s middle-class society, Helga perceives the city’s racial diversity as very divisive and inconsistent, which only deepens her “alienation and the diminution of the emerging sense of self” (Walker 172).

Eventually, the failure of Crane's integration within Harlem's black community and her "disidentification with the black bourgeoisie" (Schaper 684) leaves Helga with no choice but to escape once again.

Rafael Walker believes that the protagonist's quest for self has to be understood within the idea of "*synthesis*", meaning that "the character tries to live out biraciality through synthesizing black identity with white, attempting to exist as both black and white" (168); by placing a black woman between Europe and America, Larsen seems, as Walker intends it, to be scrutinizing perceptions over biraciality across continents and different racial cultures. After the disappointment in Harlem, Helga flees to Copenhagen, where she is hosted by her wealthy, white aunt from her mother's side of the family. Helga is welcomed in the city by her Aunt Katrina, called Fru Dahl, and her husband Herr Dahl, in a prosperous house; Helga is mesmerized by the wealthy environment in which she lived, as she was used to poverty in Naxos. Helga is at first happy with things that only money could buy, namely "leisure", "attention" and "beautiful surroundings" (Larsen 147), which eventually make her feel at place ("This, then, was where she belonged", Larsen 148). However, she soon realizes that despite Fru Dahl welcomes her in her life, giving her the illusion of finally being accepted for who she is, her insistence on giving her extravagant clothes was just a way of showing her off, in order to be able to function as exotic treasure that that will allow the Dahls to enter Europe's white cultural circles (Scheper 684). Aunt Katrine dresses Helga in bright colors and an eccentric style, with "practically nothing but a skirt" (Larsen 154). Although at the beginning Helga appreciates the curious glances and the attention she receives, she soon feels like a "pet dog being proudly exhibited" (Larsen 153). At the dinner to which her aunt takes her to show her off, the narrator explains that other white women in the room looked at her, but without envy, as they do not see her as a competitor. As Larsen writes: "The women too were kind, feeling no need for jealousy. To them this girl, this Helga Crane, this mysterious niece of the Dahls, was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn't one of them.

She didn’t at all count” (155). Essentially, wealthy white women in Copenhagen do not see her as their equal, as she was attractive in an exotic way, as if she were some sort of creature to closely observe. The gaze of these women on Helga is indeed discriminatory, as Gregory J. Hampton explains, since “exoticism is not simply a replacement or substitute for racism; it is a function of racism.” (168) Thus, the change in location from America to Europe does not only demonstrate that racism exists also across borders, but also Helga’s condition of hypervisibility. Larsen wanted to explore how cultural attitudes toward biracial women vary from culture to culture, locating the source of her protagonists’ identity not in her sense of belonging, but in how people perceive as their equal, which has always failed. Eventually, Helga decides to go back to Harlem, in order to reconnect with her roots. Rejected once again by the man she loves, Dr. Anderson, she decides to flee again, and for the last time, to a small village in the South in a rural black, poor community. The ultimate choice of marrying Reverend Pleasant Green, which will be more thoroughly analyzed in the second part of this chapter, may be seen as the only way to “free herself from class/racial crucifixion” (Dawahare 30). However, not even the black rural community she finds in Alabama seems to welcome her. In the southern village people refer to her as a northerner, as to enhance the difference between them. Considering that Helga had been rejected by both middle-class blacks and racist European whites, taking refuge in the black working-class community of the South reveals to be just an attempt to identify with a community by which she can’t be considered inferior, as like them she is black and poor.

Overall, it seems like Helga’s sense of belonging and desire are rather a deliberate decision rather than a result of her fleeing (Clemmen 461), as every time she changes location and is in a new urban space, she initially feels included, but then inevitably succumbs to racism, prejudices and fetishism. Nevertheless, to a certain extent we might see in her fleeing a sort of meaning: besides offering a way to resist oppression, as Schaper explained, being a woman in motion allows Helga Crane to refuse to conform (686). By implying that, the critic seems to contend that Helga's racial

indeterminacy, represented by her continuous wandering, is not simply about the impossibility of being biracial and accepted. Instead, it serves as an "assertion of subjectivity" through her desire to relocate, aligning with a "modern performance of subjectivity" (686). According to DeFalco, Helga's trajectory, which initially takes her away from the South and later brings her back, symbolizes her determination to distance herself from the stereotypes imposed on black female bodies by popular white culture during modernism (20). Additionally, her rejection of marriage and sexual desires signifies her refusal to conform to stereotypes about black individuals perpetuated since slavery. However, while the issue of racial indeterminacy seems to "facilitate border crossings" (Gray 258), it nevertheless complicates the quest for self. Helga, far from being able to blend in with the society, is perceived as a chameleon-like woman, completely visible and oppressed, discriminated against, and fetishized in different ways in both white and black communities. Walker, who does not *a priori* exclude the potential freedom in Helga's movement, eventually notices that she is not accepted in any dimension: "in one country, she must either disguise her identity; in the other, she is accepted into society only as an exotic curio" (174). The trajectory of escaping seems the only chance left for the heroine, and the ending is significant as the culmination of the confusion, isolation and distraught caused by the sense of non-belonging. By marrying Reverend Pleasant Green, Helga loses the "anthropological 'outsideness'" which she had cultivated as a key for mobility. On one hand, this could be seen as an "attempt to conceal the poverty, class status, and racialization of black women" (Dawahare 31); on the other hand, it shows her transformation from a "strong, independent, and charismatic world-traveler" (Gray 267) to a baby maker subjected to the role of wife and mother. Her surrender to a "physical and pastoral ideal" may reflect Larsen's intention to show that, as a mixed-race woman, Helga Crane has "no essence", not as black, white, or mulatto (Gray 268), as both in American soil and abroad, she is exposed to contradictions and representations of her identity that are "pleasant and disturbing, limiting and enabling" (Gray 258), without allowing her to find a solution to her complex identity.

4.2 Returning South: Exploring Imposed Identities and the Sexualization of the Black Woman in *Quicksand*

Why does a narrative that aims to deconstruct race, gender, and identity end with the educated biracial character retreating to the rural South (Tanner 180), instead of choosing a more cosmopolitan, urban reality? More importantly, why does a black woman who has rejected marriage multiple times accept a condition of marriage and maternity that transforms her into a "corpse" (Walker 176)? In her constant flight from white and black societies, Helga escapes not only communities that do not accept her but also the roles imposed on her due to her biraciality. Her identity and womanhood are constantly interpreted, exploited, and reconstructed in almost every place she goes. Refusing to conform to these ideologies, which make her feel either like a "disgusting" individual or an object of fetishism, she eventually retreats to a rural community where she hopes to be accepted. However, Helga does not find peace.

In the early 20th century, the representation of black femininity and sexuality was subject to several interpretations. Amelia DeFalco traces the multiple meanings of black bodies to the ideology of "primitivism" (19), which she defines as an agglomerate of assumptions about "savagery, purity, and the eternal, excluding fantasies of a 'real' primordial subject" (19). In those years, the fascination with the black female body, "whose meaning was imposed from the outside" (19), led white patriarchal culture to provide scientific interpretations of black women to justify their superiority over them. Much of Helga's psychological torment and restlessness stem from historical stereotypes that view the black female body as both a fetish and a symbol of exaggerated, "animalistic sexuality" (DeFalco 20). DeFalco claims that Helga's wanderings, which initially take her far from the South and end with her returning there, represent the biracial character's "eagerness to separate herself from the static stereotypes assigned to black female bodies by popular white culture in modernism" (20). Throughout the decades, the stereotype of the hypersexualized woman served to enhance the perceived difference between the "passive sexuality" (Barnett 578) of white women and the "overt

sexuality" (Carby qtd. in Barnett 578) associated with the image of black women. The "myth of the black woman's licentiousness" (Christian qtd. in Barnett 578) has its roots in the legacy of slavery; black women's sexuality became a popular trope in Southern culture, constructed by whites to relieve slave masters from responsibility for the rape of black women (Barnett 578) and to justify mixed-race children as a product of miscegenation.

In *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen aimed to portray women who "threatened polarized societies" (Walker 166) in a world that maintained a clear-cut distinction between whites and blacks. Modernization reconfigured images of womanhood for white women from the late 19th to the early 20th century, allowing them greater liberty to express their sexuality (Walker 167-168). The situation was much different for black middle-class women. Historically perceived as hypersexualized primitives, black women faced stricter standards; the black bourgeoisie was "much less forgiving of the expression of sexual desire" (Walker 168) among black women. At the turn of the century, African American authors sought to eradicate this stereotype by portraying black heroines who "exemplified Victorian womanhood" (Walker 166), hoping to inspire racial uplift. Later, during the 1920s, within the polarized cultural and historical framework of the Harlem Renaissance and the segregated United States, Larsen writes about a mixed-race female character caught between conceptions of femininity related to desire and sexuality, and the rejection of an identity linked to sexualized womanhood. According to Hazel V. Carby, both male and female black immigrants suffered exploitation by whites, but urbanization had specific "class-specific and gender-specific consequences" for black women (739). The movement of black women from rural to industrial spaces generated a series of "moral panics" (Carby qtd. in Scheper), labeling female migrants as "sexually degenerate" or "socially dangerous" (Carby 739). Larsen scrutinizes sexuality when dealing with biracial identities, as Helga Crane constantly tries to escape stereotypes imposed on her. In doing so, she inadvertently suppresses her own desires, becoming an object of others' perceptions. This makes it difficult for her to find a stable sense of identity amidst these conflicting definitions. Indeed, Helga Crane's image is

problematized in the novel; she constantly strives to avoid being associated with sexualized images of blackness in order to achieve racial uplift. However, to do so, she must suppress her own sexual desires. Nineteenth-century black novelists sought to revolt against the myth of oversexualized black women by depicting characters devoid of “all sexual desire” (McDowell qtd. in Barnett 579), portraying them as chaste and pure. In contrast, authors of the Harlem Renaissance in the early 20th century distanced themselves from the concerns of the previous generation, where the image of desireless blacks was confined to the Reconstruction South. Instead, they aimed to present a vision of blackness that countered the “primitive” stereotype embraced by both white and black writers during the Harlem Renaissance (Barnett 579). Barnett argues that *Quicksand* challenges both perspectives: the “racist [depiction] of primitive sexuality” and the “reactionary portraits of desexualized black bourgeoisie women” (580). In the novel, Helga experiences sexual desire, which, however, remains largely unexpressed and marginalized. Her subjectivity perpetually contrasts with the external projections of her image.

We see Helga through various perspectives, each interpreting her womanhood and femininity differently. One of the most significant depictions of black female sexuality is presented in the scene of the portrait in Copenhagen, an emblematic moment in the novel. Helga is introduced to Axel Olsen, a Danish suitor arranged by her aunt, who becomes obsessed with her during her time in Europe. Olsen goes so far as to paint a portrait of Helga. Upon viewing the portrait, Helga describes it as a “disgusting sensual creature with her features” (Larsen 199). According to DeFalco, just as the myth of black female voluptuousness was used to blame slave women for their masters' sexual desires and thereby justify their sexual abuse, “Axel's ‘sensual’ portrait, which he perceives as the ‘real’ Helga, exploits stereotypes of blackness to justify his own desire” (DeFalco 25). Indeed, Axel eventually verbalizes his sexual attraction and fascination by proposing to her. It is at this moment that Helga realizes Axel's desire for her stems solely from the exoticism her appearance conveys, as depicted in his painting through the sensual portrayal of her blackness. In order to resist this objectification, Helga

needs to ‘refuse the painting’, rejecting Olsen’s marriage proposal (“But you see, Herr Olsen, I’m not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don’t at all care to be owned. Even by you.” Larsen 195), even after he claims she has the “soul of a prostitute” (Larsen 194). Helga rejects Olsen, and he asserts perplexedly that “I think that my picture of you is, after all, the true Helga Crane. Therefore—a tragedy” (Larsen 198), emphasizing his perception of her as a sexual object. Despite Helga repeatedly reassuring herself that she is glad she refused him, it becomes clear that she is pervaded by constant self-doubt. Olsen’s words continue to echo in her mind (Larsen 199), illustrating that although she rejected marriage and the primitive, animalistic image Olsen constructed of her, she is “unable to escape from the taint of the sensual stereotype lurking behind the artist's representation of her features, as she cannot separate her own burgeoning sexuality from her participation in a cultural ritual that defines black women as sexual objects” (Hostetler 41). Helga’s repulsion for her sexualized image is probably Larsen’s attempt to react to white myths of blackness, but this feeling is so rooted in Helga that when she feels authentic desire, it’s like succumbing to the ideologies of primitivism. In the novel, there are many oscillations between “resistance and participation” (DeFalco 25) to sexual desire, which symbolize the clash between primitivistic representation and her own desires. This clash is exemplified by the fact that whenever Helga’s sexual desire is aroused, she feels ashamed. In Harlem, Helga undergoes a “sensual experience” (DeFalco 27) while watching some black dancers at a jazz club she feels mesmerized by the dancing bodies, only to deny her attraction the moment the dance ends:

> “They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms. For the while, Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself

back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her." (Larsen 129)

Helga abandons herself to the music. While feeling "drugged, lifted, sustained" by what she describes as an "extraordinary music", she somehow transcends the "repression that functions to protect her subjectivity" (DeFalco 27). The "bodily motion" Helga experiences, which is pure sensual attraction, is immediately suppressed; as soon as she realizes she is experiencing sexual desire, she deliberately decides to be ashamed of it ("shameful certainty", Larsen 129), so as to make sure she gets away from the feeling that is, in the case of black women, associated with primitivism. As DeFalco points out, Helga's desire is perceived as "a threat, a bodily experience that Helga perceives as a capitulation to primitivist constructions of the female black body" (28); by indulging that sentiment, Helga would give ground to the view that white people have of black women, so, as she is used to doing, she leaves the scene.

It is during the scene of the kiss with Dr. Anderson that Helga Crane, for the first time in the novel, feels legitimated to experience sexual satisfaction. At a party, as Helga leaves the room to adjust her red dress in the bathroom. In a corridor hidden from the view of the celebrants, she stumbles upon Dr. Anderson, who is now married to Anne. The two, in a spontaneous moment of passion, indulge in an enthralling kiss. At first, Helga, accustomed to rejecting sexual attraction, "fought against [Anderson] with all her might" to then feel a "long-hidden, half-understood desire [welling] up in her with the suddenness of a dream" (Larsen 233). The following weeks she continues to daydream about that kiss, finally realizing and accepting the overwhelming presence of her "insistent desire" (Larsen 238). Anderson, however, instead of leaving Anne to be with Helga, turns her down, blaming the kiss on alcohol, rather than admitting an authentic interest in her. Right when Helga decides to take action upon her will, and therefore, to deliberately comply with the stereotype on black women's emphasized sexual desire, she is "'slapped' by [Anderson's] cool apology for what she realizes he views as a dark, *primitive* sexual attraction" (Hostetler 43, emphasis mine). According

to Helga's perception, Anderson, just like Olsen, identifies her as a mere object of sexual impulse; the failure of the relationship with Dr. Anderson reinforces Helga's fears to be perceived as a "sexual temptation" (Barnett 577) and therefore a "sexually desiring subject" (Hostetler 43), rather than as a woman with her own subjectivity and legitimate desires.

The inexplicable change in the story in the end could be a response precisely to this sexual objectification. Immediately after Anderson's disappointment, Helga runs away and later finds herself in the middle of a church function. Here she meets Reverend Pleasant Green, who despite the beauty his name evokes, Larsen describes as a "rattish yellow man" (263). Eventually, Helga decides to marry him and moves to a small rural town in the South, in Alabama. Initially, as always happens to Helga, she seems to have found happiness and a place where she fits in ("Here, she had found, she was sure, the intangible thing for which, indefinitely, always she had craved. It had received embodiment", Larsen 268-269). However, she progressively grows intolerant of her own children and of her life relegated to the role of wife and mother ("The children used her up", Larsen 275). Moreover, marriage objectifies her, and the conjugal bed becomes the instrument of this oppression (Walker 176), and Helga, eventually, grows hatred towards the man she has married ("She knew only that, in the hideous agony that for interminable hours—no, centuries—she had borne, the luster of religion had vanished; that revulsion had come upon her; that she hated this man. Between them the vastness of the universe had come." Larsen 288). In the sad last pages of the novel, we witness the psychological and physical degradation of Helga, where her body, ruined and tired by pregnancy, is essentially transformed into a "corpse" (Walker 176), a mere object of reproduction. Religious faith is initially where Helga finds resolution for all her delusions, as she sees it as "a kind of protective coloring, shielding her from the cruel light of an unbearable reality" (Larsen 281). Later, however, distraught by the dissolution of herself and the failed attempt to finally find her own subjectivity to heteronormativity (marriage and reproduction), understands the uselessness of religion. Recalling Helga's words: "And this, Helga decided, was what ailed the whole Negro race in America, this

fatuous belief in the white man's God, this child-like trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in 'kingdom come'" (Larsen 297). This harsh criticism emerging from the protagonist is directed towards the American community that views God as salvation and it may be seen as Larsen's critique of African Americans who place their hopes in faith instead of actively working to advance their race by challenging stereotypes.

In conclusion, rather than witnessing the definition of Helga Crane's biracial identity, we observe its dissolution and her inability to escape the paralysis, the 'quicksand', caused by the uncertainty of her racial identity. Helga's journey illustrates how biracial identity is perceived in America, not only through the gaze of white people, but also through the complexities existing within the black community. In Harlem, Copenhagen, and Alabama, there are different takes on black women's sexuality. As Clemmen argues, the plot operates on multiple levels, namely the political (social and racial), sexual, and biological (460), each contributing to the construction - or negation - of Helga Crane's identity. The political dimension is evident in Naxos, where her black heritage indirectly labels her as "savage" subjected to segregation and white supremacy. The sexual dimension unfolds in Harlem, where she becomes both object and subject of desire, and in Copenhagen, where she is objectified through racist and primitive representations of her biracial identity. The biological dimension manifests in a small Alabama town, where her existence is reduced to a reproductive role under deterministic expectations. Despite the complexity in defining Helga's identity across various dimensions, none succeed in affirming her subjectivity. Consequently, unable to integrate fully into any community, she inadvertently conforms to stereotypes of sexuality and objectification imposed upon her. The novel's conclusion portrays Helga as grounding herself in "corporality" (Tanner 194), embodying an oversexualized image that defines blacks according to white American and European perspectives. Ultimately, Helga's stagnation is not only physical, but also metaphysical. Her marriage to Reverend Pleasant Green is largely symbolic, alluding to a connection between sexuality and religion that she seeks to embrace. Her return to the South and identification with Green's community,

despite opportunities in the North, reflects her ongoing struggle against racist perceptions. Despite her efforts, her desire to cease being seen as “other” remains unfulfilled.

CONCLUSION

The stories of the female protagonists in the three novels I analyzed in this thesis are marked by numerous factors that inevitably influence their choice to return to rural life. Lewis, Glasgow and Larsen, despite belonging to different literary movements and cultural contexts, all used their female protagonists as a tool to highlight the limitations of 1920s society, albeit with a different emphasis.

The tensions between the rural and urban environment certainly inspired Sinclair Lewis to write a novel that could highlight the weight of conformism and traditionalism. Lewis tries to use the female figure as a vehicle for analyzing the possibilities of women in both a rural and an urban environment. In neither space, Carol seems to find her place. In rural society, Carol has to deal with society's expectations of her role as woman, wife and mother, a society that leaves no room for self-determination and the freedom to accept what is different. In the city, she feels alienated, unable to keep up with progressive ideologies, finding in herself the conformism from which she tried so hard to escape. Carol, in other words, embodies the ambivalence between traditionalism and progressivism in American society in the 1920s. Her final decision to go back to Gopher Prairie seems to be just a Pyrrhic victory for Carol; yes, she returns to the village with a renovated faith in progress and armed with "unembittered laughter" (Lewis 292), through which she will be able to endure the provinciality of small-town America. But at what cost? The novel's epilogue is ambiguous: while hoping for a brighter future, Carol Kennicott surrenders to conformity by accepting a husband, children, and a dull life of domesticity in the same society made her inert, anchored to her status quo, depending on her role as the doctor's wife. Carol Kennicott's journey of maturation and emancipation in Sinclair Lewis' *Main Street* is not a tale of progressive growth, but of regression towards outer and inner seclusion. Carol, in the end, contracts the dreaded 'Village Virus'. The final reconciliation between Carol and

Will, and consequently Carol's return to the village, may be Lewis's attempt to represent a solution to the two contrasting trends in 1920s American culture. On one hand, since Carol decides to fight for her ideals in Gopher Prairie, her choice can be seen as a hopeful sign for a different future in terms of expectations for women, as demonstrated by Carol's promise to teach her daughter to be progressive one day. On the other hand, Carol's return could represent the inadequacy of the modern industrialized world, which is stifling and full of contradictions. Lewis may have also wanted to demonstrate the necessary coexistence of these two defining aspects of 1920s America: rural traditionalism and urban progressivism.

With *Barren Ground*, Ellen Glasgow brings about a real revolution in the depiction of the female character compared to the earlier literary tradition of the plantation myth, where women, represented by the emblem of the Southern-Belle, played a marginal role under the patriarchal control of their husbands. Despite in both novels the heroines return to the small-town village, the endings of *Barren Ground* and *Main Street* are quite different. Carol gives up the prospects of a life in a more culturally open environment where she could be economically independent, accepting her identification with the roles of mother and wife. However, she keeps her dissent alive and openly opposes the environment in which she lives. Dorinda, on the other hand, harshly rejects the possibility of having a family, dedicating herself entirely to work, a choice that proves to be fruitful since, unlike Carol, she manages to become completely independent without the help of a man. However, both women, though in different ways, are destined to psychological seclusion. Dorinda Oakley, who represents the ideal of the "New" South, manages to overcome the poverty she lives in, and the societal constraints imposed on women in the South. Not only does she reject marriage, albeit not entirely by her own choice, but she also succeeds in building her own business through her efforts and self-sacrifice, without the help of a man. The male characters in the novel, who are either unsuccessful or of little significance, seem to highlight Glasgow's representation of the contradictions and inadequacies of the patriarchal system, especially in contrast to the woman's potential within the

family and society. However, Dorinda's victory is bittersweet. By rejecting marriage, she also forgoes the chance to love and the possibility of having children. This choice might seem deliberate and conscious on the one hand, but on the other, it may reflect the grim reality that a woman should not have both a fulfilling career and a happy relationship. Unlike Carol in *Main Street* who chooses marital life over autonomy and independence in the capital, Dorinda rejects marriage in favor of work. This narratological choice represents an innovation with regards to traditional plots reserved for female characters but may also represent Ellen Glasgow's critique of Southern mentality, which does not allow women to emancipate themselves and be considered on the same level as men in terms of their potential as workers. Glasgow does not, however, entirely dismiss the importance of the "Old" South. In the novel, she often indulges in almost idyllic descriptions of the Virginian landscape, a stylistic choice that underlines the ambivalent character of her writing. To celebrate the bond with the land, Glasgow reinterprets the element of nature, making women and nature intrinsically linked: women manage to tame nature while simultaneously preserving its value. Understood in this way, Dorinda's return to Old Farm represents both the deep connection Ellen Glasgow has with the imagery and environment of the South, and a proposal for a shift in gender roles, where the woman succeeds, even if the cost to be paid is to remain psychologically drained and sentimentally *barren*.

Helga Crane's story is a "tragic" tale of a biracial woman trying to find her place in the world, with all her efforts ultimately proving futile. Due to her marginal status as a mixed-race woman, Helga remains trapped in a liminal space, unaccepted by both the white and black communities. Helga is therefore a "victim not only of the limitations set by white America but of those set by the black community as well" (Fleming 552). In a sense, this choice by Nella Larsen may represent a critique of the barriers imposed by both America on African Americans, and by the black community on its own women. In this regard, Larsen problematizes the definition of the "New Negro" proposed by Harlem Renaissance artists, offering a bleak view of the opportunities available to black women. Even if educated, these women cannot overcome certain social barriers to progress, particularly when

such prospects are influenced by their biracial identity. Some critics have suggested the emancipatory potential of Helga Crane's mobility. However, despite her attempts to integrate into Copenhagen society, where she initially believes she can blend in with the city's affluent community, Helga falls victim to the white perception of black women as exotic and sexualized beings. Notably, Axel Olsen deliberately calls Helga a "prostitute" (Larsen 194) after proposing to her, as if legitimizing his sexual desire through his prejudice, viewing Helga only as a sexual object. Everyone around her seems able to define her identity, which is never recognized as that of a biracial woman. To the black bourgeoisie, she is "disgusting" (Larsen 199) because of her white heritage, while to racist whites, she is just a "[savage]" (Larsen 26). In both cases, she is seen as an outsider to ostracize because of her racial identity. Through Helga's experience in Copenhagen, Larsen reminds us of the limits imposed by miscegenation's 'one drop rule', which restricts the possibilities of the offspring of interracial couples; to whites, Helga remains a black woman regardless. Despite Helga's resistance to the myth of black female licentiousness that became popular in Southern culture as a legacy of slavery, she ultimately conforms to this stereotype, seemingly the only way for her to fit into a defined role, albeit one imposed by racist whites. The promise of defining an image for black women fails, as Helga, by returning to a Southern village in a lower social status than she had in Naxos and Harlem, signifies an acceptance of the tropes of womanhood imposed by white society. These tropes portray her as poor, suited only for reproduction and subject to her own perceived licentiousness. Helga's final psychological and physical annihilation, which recalls Carol Kennicott's seclusion in Gopher Prairie and Dorinda Oakley's psychic degradation, demonstrates the impossibility of self-identification and self-determination for biracial women.

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