The Difference Study Guide

The Difference by Ellen Glasgow

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Contents

Introduction

Although Ellen Glasgow's literary reputation rests on the strengths and popularity of her numerous novels, it was in her short stories that the author first began to explore one of her important themes—the female consciousness. Her interest in issues such as women's problems carrying on a career or in not marrying—issues that Glasgow faced—has since led many critics to call her an early supporter of women's rights, long before it became a national issue.

In "The Difference," published in 1923 in both Harpers Magazine and the short story collection *The Shadowy Third and Other Stories*, Glasgow effectively grapples with the role of women in turnof- the-century society. In it she portrays a Victorian woman's discovery of her husband's infidelity and examines the heroine's difficulty in adjusting her romantic ideals to those of the modern world. With this story, Glasgow's story also indirectly points out the restrictive nature of women's role in earlytwentieth- century society. Glasgow, whose writings were largely concerned with chronicling the South's history and changing cultural conditions, shows herself to be equally skillful at depicting the more interior woman's world.

The story, however, generated little attention at the time of its publication. Such disregard is a reflection, not of the story's quality, but of Glasgow's distinguished and productive career as a novelist, which lessened interest in the author's short fiction. Although most reviewers in the early 1920s commented favorably on the story, as do contemporary critics, it remains until present-day as a sidenote in most discussions of Glasgow's writings. Yet, of the relatively few short stories Glasgow published, "The Difference" is generally considered one of her best. In it, Glasgow clearly demonstrates her ability both to produce a wellcrafted story as well as create a realistic and universal heroine.

Author Biography

Ellen Glasgow was born in 1873 to a well-established Richmond, Virginia, family. A frail child, Glasgow led a secluded life and even was primarily educated at home. At the age of 16, she began to lose her hearing. This debility only increased her desire for solitude.

Glasgow began writing at a young age. By 1890, she had completed some 400 pages of a novel, *Sharp Realities*, but she destroyed it the following year after an unfavorable meeting with a publisher's agent in New York. Despite this failure, she began writing *The Descendant* that same year. The writing of fiction, however, was not deemed an appropriate behavior for a young southern woman. The novel was published in 1897, under the author "Anonymous." *The Descendant* drew immediate critical attention and was widely perceived to be work of the popular author Harold Frederick; Glasgow took being mistaken for a male writer as a compliment. Although most of her family and friends did not read Glasgow's first published work, it was personally relevant for Glasgow, as she believed it to contain "the germ" of all her future writings.

Because of her loss of hearing and frailty, and the depression brought on by her mother's death in 1893, Glasgow primarily resided in the family home in Richmond. She never married, but her travels to New York, the East Coast, and Europe, through which she met fellow writers, made her feel less isolated as she immersed herself in her career and in developing her talents.

Glasgow continued to write steadily, publishing about a dozen novels in little more than a decade. Many of these earlier works were bestsellers. By the 1920s, however, she had begun to win recognition as an important southern novelist as well as a popular one. Many critics felt that her work detailed the changing southern history of the past century.

Glasgow also dealt with issues important to women such as marriage, career, and independence. Her autobiography, *The Woman Within*, published posthumously in 1954, suggests that she faced the same dilemmas that she raised in her novels.

Throughout Glasgow's formidable and lengthy career, her reputation and popularity grew. In addition to publishing 19 bestselling novels, Glasgow also wrote poems, essays, short stories, and the aforementioned biography. While Glasgow's contemporaries widely regarded her as a commercial success—her books were purchased by book clubs such as the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Literary Guild—they also honored her with numerous awards as well as honorary degrees. She was only the sixth woman elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Letters, in 1938, and in 1940, that same organization awarded her the Howells Medal. She received the *Saturday Review of Literature* award for Distinguished Service to American Literature in 1941, and later that year her novel *In This Our Life* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. While today Glasgow is not as well-remembered as such contemporaries as Edith Wharton and Willa Cather, she was one of America's first realist writers. Ellen Glasgow died in 1945.

Plot Summary

As the story opens, Margaret Fleming stands at the window of her home, watching the leaves fall in an autumn wind. Margaret has just received a letter from a woman named Rose Morrison, a woman who claims to be in love with and loved by Margaret's husband of 20 years, George. As Margaret contemplates the destruction of her happiness, George enters the room. The couple talk of household matters, demonstrating the ease with which Margaret cares for George's personal and professional needs. Then he departs again, leaving Margaret alone with her complete terror at the unexpected turn this most important relationship has taken.

As Margaret vows to fight for George, the butler announces the arrival of Margaret's friend Dorothy. This lifelong friend uncannily brings up a pertinent topic: the refusal of a mutual friend to give her philandering husband a divorce and his subsequent return to their home. Margaret declares her incomprehension at the friend's actions, wondering why she would want to stay with her husband when he does not love her. Thus the two friends embark on a short debate on love. Dorothy points out that Margaret sees love as "a kind of abstract power," but for the friend's husband, as with most men, love is simply a way of feeling. Margaret believes that a man cannot love two women at the same time. Dorothy finds Margaret desperately naive, pointing out that a marriage provides a man and a woman with more than merely love. Then Dorothy asks Margaret what turns out to be a crucial question: "Would you [give up your husband], if it were George?" Margaret's answer, which comes slowly, shows a complete turnaround from her previous way of thinking; she declares that indeed she would give up George.

After Dorothy's departure, Margaret resolves to stick to her decision. She takes care of her household chores for what she believes to be the last time, and heads out the door to visit Rose Morrison. During the long street car ride, Margaret reflects on her marriage to George.

Rose Morrison turns out to be a lovely, flamboyant woman, clearly an artist and a member of the younger, Bohemian generation. Margaret declares her intention of discussing the situation. Rose apologizes for how the letter must have hurt Margaret but felt that the women should spare George in resolving the problem. Margaret and Rose civilly discuss the latter's feelings for George. Although Rose says that George would rather suffer his love for her in silence than hurt Margaret, she finds this situation unfair to George, for she believes that the subterfuge is spoiling his life. While Rose does not tell Margaret what to do, she makes it clear that if Margaret does not give him his freedom, she is halting his "self-development." George, she claims, needs to be around modern ideas and modern people.

Margaret again settles on sacrificing herself to George's happiness, believing he must truly love Rose in order to hurt her so deeply. She declares her intention of giving up George. Then she leaves her rival and goes home. On the long street car ride, she reflects on how George must love Rose and how the younger generation differs morally from hers.

George has been anxiously awaiting Margaret's return, and she instantly tells him she has been to see Rose Morrison. As the name leaves her lips, she sees in her husband's face, not humiliation, but emptiness. She explains that Rose wrote to her of his love and asked her to give him up. George, who for most of the conversation has been merely repeating Margaret's words, does not understand why Margaret has gotten involved in the situation. Further he declares that he does not love Rose at all and that he will not see her anymore. He notes that Margaret seems angry that he does not love Rose, and at a query from Margaret, declares he has no intention of leaving her for the younger woman. When Margaret reminds him that Rose believes he is in love with her, he says that he has been foolish but that Margaret is making too much of the situation.

Margaret realizes the truth of his words and that, in fact, she has overdramatized her approach to life in her high ideals of nobility and self-sacrifice. As George stammers out excuses and calls Rose "a recreation," she briefly feels united with Rose as she understands the disillusionment with love that she feels and that Rose soon will feel. Margaret was willing to sacrifice her own happiness for her husband's, but the fact that he would hurt her for anything less than great love has taken away her very belief in life. George sees nothing of the immense anguish that his wife is experiencing, instead urging her to eat a good dinner.

Characters

Dorothy Chambers

Margaret's good friend Dorothy comes to visit on the fateful day that the story plays out. The short visit provides Glasgow with the chance for Margaret to share her most important ideals about love: that all people should be with those they love, even if it means giving up a spouse. When Margaret wonders why a woman would want to be with a man who clearly prefers another, Dorothy points out that couples stay together for other reasons, such as comfort and material gain. Dorothy's crucial question—" Would you [give your husband up], if it were George"—makes Margaret decide to give up her life with George so that he can be with Rose.

Dorothy also serves as a bridge between the generations. Unlike Margaret and like Rose, she smokes cigarettes. The knowing manner in which she speaks of a husband's affair implies its commonness in the lifestyle of she and her circle.

George Fleming

George Fleming appears to be a "typical" husband of his time—he relies on his wife to take care of all his creature comforts and depends on the strength of her love while doing little to demonstrate his own. A lawyer, George appears to be driven less by passion than by convenience; even his affair with Rose began less out of desire for the younger woman and more out of convenience as Margaret was incapacitated at the time. When faced with the affair, instead of apologizing to his wife, George forms lawyerly, logical arguments. He believes that the affair should not bother Margaret because he never loved Rose. In doing so, he irrefutably proves that he neither understands his wife nor is willing to make any effort to do so.

Margaret Fleming

Margaret Fleming, the story's protagonist, has been happily married to George for 20 years when she learns his alarming secret: that he is having an affair with a woman named Rose Morrison. Margaret has centered her life around that of her husband, taking care of his personal needs as well as assisting him professionally. She has sacrificed any independent life and suppressed her own desires. Now she feels that her whole life is an illusion and that her perfect world is destroyed.

Margaret's beliefs that all people should be with those they love lead to her decision to sacrifice her own happiness and give up George. She reasons that George must love Rose, or else he would not betray her, Margaret. She also embraces her own martyrdom to elevate the pedestrian situation. Not until George rejects her offer to set him free, telling her the affair with Rose was merely a dalliance, does Margaret realize the futility of her gesture. She has lost her former happiness as well as the opportunity

to be selfless—both the fundamentals of her life with George. By the end, Margaret has lost her idealistic view of love, her own marriage, and life itself.

Rose Morrison

Rose Morrison, a woman in her twenties, is a Bohemian artist type. She dresses in strange modern clothes, reads the latest books, and has a studio in Greenwich Village in New York City. At first she appears to the reader and to Margaret as the antithesis of her rival: wild, artsy, impassioned, and careless. However, her feelings for George prove that when it comes to matters of the heart, she is not so unlike Margaret, whom she calls a "Victorian woman"; like the older woman, she believes that George's happiness is more important than anything else.

Rose acted without George's knowledge when she wrote of the affair to Margaret, and thus the feelings that she shares with the older woman reflect only her views, not George's as well. Rose believes that the passion she and George share is indeed love, yet, unlike Margaret, she does not believe in the finality of love. In this way, her more Bohemian nature does assert itself.

Themes

The Generation Gap

The generation gap that so often exists between older and younger members of society is an important theme in the story. In Rose's eyes, Margaret is a "Victorian woman," meaning she is hopelessly old-fashioned and behind the times; in Margaret's eyes, Rose is clearly a "Bohemian," someone who embraces new thoughts and ideas and rebels against the old order. Because the story is told strictly from Margaret's point of view, readers only understand her criticism of the younger generation: Rose's talk of "self-development" as simply the "catchwords" of the "new freedom"; Rose's generation's lack of understanding the compromises that make a good relationship. Readers do not internally experience Rose's impression of Margaret's Victorianism, but Rose's feelings are neatly summed up in the phrase, "Oh, I wonder what you Victorian women did for a solace when you weren't allowed even a cigarette!" Rose also demonstrates her generation's liberal attitude toward love and partnerships when she declares that should she come to love another, George will give her up.

Margaret further equates Rose's generation with a more general breakdown of society. Rose's generation, according to Margaret, has bypassed all the traditions that make society stable. She sees this not only in Rose's usurpation of her husband but in the very circumstances with which she surrounds herself— the neglected villa, the leaves left to rot in the yard, the run in Rose's stocking. Margaret believes that her own adherence to what is proper and moral shows her generation's superiority. To Margaret, Rose epitomizes a younger, selfish breed of Americans, willing to sacrifice anything or anyone to meet their own needs.

Other elements of the story, however, show that the generation gap is not the primary reason for the conflict between Margaret and Rose, nor does it have to separate women of different age groups. Similarities between Margaret and Rose do exist, particularly in their mutual belief that George's having an affair with the younger woman proves that he loves her. Dorothy Chambers also represents a character conscious of her generation's ideals, yet open to a changing moral landscape. Dorothy seems more responsive to modern influences; not only does she smoke, but, unlike Margaret, she does not believe that an affair means the end of a marriage.

Love and Adultery

The different ways of looking at love and adultery cause the plot conflict in the story. Margaret believes that the only reason that her husband would betray her is for love, while George believes that an adulterous relationship can be embarked upon merely as "recreation." He never denies his love for his wife nor does he claim to love Rose. Instead, as justification for the affair, George subtlety presents quite stereotypical reasons for his involvement with Rose, that she was young, amorously adventurous,

and available. George never fathoms that his attachment could have any bearing on his affection for his wife.

To Margaret, however, George's actions come to symbolize his lack of love for her. Only a man who holds her in such little regard, she reasons, could hurt her so much for no good reason (fun is not good enough reason, but love is). Margaret's anguish truly revolves around the question of what is love and what it means. For Margaret it is an abstract, powerful bond between two people, but for George it more of a basic part of daily living. As Dorothy puts it, "women love with their imagination and men with their senses."

While the story questions what love means to different people, it does not question why people stray in their relationships. Because the story is so defined by Margaret's vision and thoughts, and because she cannot conceive of adultery without love, the story never explores the meaning of adultery in a similar way to its treatment of love. This may also be a reflection of the morals of the period in which the story was written and published.

Sex Roles

Margaret clearly plays out the role of many women of her generation; she is the thoughtful helpmate of her husband, taking care of all household chores and problems while at the same time assisting George as needed in his professional duties. She revels in this role, never questioning the importance of her life's duties though they are constrained by her sex, until she learns of George's unfaithfulness. When she receives Rose's letter, her whole world is shattered. For while Margaret was never a "partner" in any late-20th century sense of the word, she always believed that her role in George's life made her irreplaceable. She also admits to her willing subordination of her own desires to his, though she does not admit to any hidden desires until her world has been turned upside down.

George makes clear to Margaret his need for her to continue this role, while asserting that he never loved Rose. In so doing, he distinctly separates the roles of "wife" and "mistress"; he also demonstrates that women of that time period had more than one role to play, but that in all probability, neither of these options—helpmate or lover—could entirely fulfill a man.

George's obtuseness to his wife's pain and disillusionment can be attributed to a gender gap. As Dorothy succinctly puts it: "When a man and a woman talk of love they speak two different languages. They can never understand each other." This truth plays out in the Fleming's marriage. Margaret believes that all she does to help George irreparably ties him to her with bonds of love, not necessity, while George seeks out Rose simply because he enjoys her company. For George, Rose is of the moment, but this does not detract from his desire to spend his life with Margaret.

Style

Point of View

The story is told from a third-person, limited point of view. This means that readers see and hear only what one character sees and hears, and that readers are also privy to that character's thoughts. In "The Difference," all events are filtered through Margaret. Glasgow typically chooses one protagonist through which to view the action. This technique is particularly important to the development of the story—the reader can follow the transformation of Margaret's thought processes, leading to a better understanding of why she acts as she acts, and thus more deeply feel what she is going through. The reader is with Margaret as she feels the terror at the idea of losing her husband, grapples with her ideals about love, comes to re-evaluate Rose's relationship with George, makes the crucial decision to give her husband up, and finally faces failure even in that aspect—a failure that points up the failure of her worldview. This point of view—almost complete immersion in one character—is wellsuited to Glasgow's investigations of the female consciousness.

Mood

Mood is closely associated with point of view in the story, for the prevailing mood of the story— which is closely tied to Margaret's observations and thoughts—is melancholic, overdramatic, and at times, sentimental. The language of the narrator further emphasizes the moods, reiterating Margaret's feelings. Phrases such as "rain-soaked world," "the odour of melancholy," and "grave-like mounds of leaves," to only cull out a few, clearly set the scene upon which this mild drama plays out. The world in which Margaret now finds herself is dreary, fading, and disturbingly foreign. Margaret imbues herself with all the characteristics of a great tragic heroine because she has loved and lost. She consciously makes the decision to renounce her own happiness, thinking in terms of "sacrifice" and "self-surrender." While Margaret certainly may feel that she is giving George the "supreme gift of her happiness," there is no doubt that she chooses to do so under a somewhat theatrical guise. Unfortunately for Margaret, she comes to realize that the mood she has set for herself is not one shared by the other players. She recognizes her dramatization of the day's events—she realizes that "she had overplayed life."

Satire

Satire is the use of humor, wit, or ridicule to criticize human nature and societal institutions, and indirect satire, as found in "The Difference" relies upon the ridiculous behavior of characters to make its point. Indeed, the satire in the story can be seen as so subtle and indirect that noted scholars have disagreed as to whether it actually exists. Applying the simple definition of *satire*, however, to George's behavior at the end

of the story makes a clear point for its presence. While at first George responds in a stereotypical manner-making excuses for the affair, tacitly blaming his wife, denying any emotional attachment to his mistress—he finds that his justifi- cation is making little headway with Margaret. Then his actions turn to the ridiculous, as foreshadowed by the narrative voice which remarks that "his face cleared [of gloomy severity] as if by magic." Suddenly, George has come to the epiphany that Margaret is upset because she is tired and hungry. "You must try to eat a good dinner," he says, and then lifts her in his arms to take her to the dining room. The implication is clearly that once Margaret has a full belly, her head will clear of all this nonsense. The final scene strikes a true note of humor, as the reader envisions Margaret lying deathlike in the arms of her husband, listlessly gazing out the window at the falling leaves.

Symbolism and Imagery

A number of symbols and images reinforce Margaret's feelings throughout the story. The everpresent leaves and the color red are the most powerful symbols. The leaves primarily represent the passage of Margaret's life as well as its continuity— she has stood at the same window autumn after autumn, watching the leaves fall from the trees. Even by the story's close, when Margaret has undergone a life-altering transformation, the leaves continue to fall. However, this season the autumn leaves also represent something more sinister; the leaves outside of Rose's villa are wet and remind Margaret of graves—they symbolize for Margaret the death of her marriage, her ideals, and her dreams. Further, as Margaret leaves Rose's villa, the untidy leaves cluttering up the path and the yard also symbolize for her a sense of moral superiority, her adherence to the proper traditions and the proper standards—proper, of course, as defined by her peers.

The red flowers serve as a reminder to Margaret of the flamboyance of Rose, particularly in comparison to her own restrained personality. She interprets George's approval of the red lilies in the library—"Nice colour," he says—as his disapproval of her and his predisposition for a woman like Rose. "You always liked red," she replies, and then reminds him of how pale she always was. Unknown to George, she is drawing a comparison between two types of women as represented by Rose and herself. Upon meeting Rose, the younger woman supports Margaret's expectations with her red hair and the "flame" in her face. Rose is equated with the color red, the color of passion.

Historical Context

Bohemians in Greenwich Village

Shortly after 1900, artists, writers, actors, and political thinkers from all over the United States began to flock to Greenwich Village at the lower end of Manhattan in New York City. These Bohemians—people who live an unconventional, carefree existence and react against accepted societal morality—were attracted both by inexpensive lodgings and by New York's numerous cultural opportunities, such as attending museums. After the war, however, writers and artists came to predominate in the Village. Writers were close to all the major American publishing houses, and artists could display their work in galleries, even if they were small and obscure. Greenwich Village also boasted experimental theater groups, such as the Provincetown Players, which was co-founded by writer Susan Glaspell in 1915 and which was controlled by artists, not businesspeople. In its 14-year-history, the players produced some 90 plays by new writers such as Eugene O'Neill. "Little magazines," or journals, devoted to new ways of thinking also emerged out of Village culture. *The Masses*, for instance, founded in Greenwich Village in 1911, was dedicated to art, literature, and socialism, which featured works by America's most radical writers and artists. Greenwich Village was also home to a group of intellectuals, including communists, socialists, and other revolutionary thinkers. Such Bohemians came to define the region, which was considered to be artsy and alternative as well as a haven for artists.

The Modern Art Scene

By the early 1920s, the American public had been introduced to new trends in art, such as cubism, which emphasized geometric forms, shapes, and designs; dadaism, which denounced all conventional standards; and surrealism, which attempted to symbolize the unconscious and the world of dreams. The 1913 Armory exhibition in New York shocked the public with Marcel Duchamp's painting, *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2*. New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art did not want to display these radical new styles of art, a feeling shared by other institutions that held yearly exhibitions. As a direct response, several wealthy art patrons established New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1929, a museum dedicated to the display of new art. MOMA proved that modern art had finally achieved respectability.

Some American artists chose to chronicle aspects of the contemporary landscape, particularly the effects of the machine age on society. Many painters depicted urban, industrial settings. They often focused on such elements as factories, technology, workers, and tenements.

The Modern American Woman

Long before the start of the 20th century, "the cult of true womanhood" or "the cult of domesticity," which called for a woman to devote herself to her family and the homelife, had become firmly entrenched in American gender ideals. Women had little external personal identity. Their positions were primarily determined by the achievements and social status of their husbands. Women, however, were not seen as inferior to men; instead, they were considered to be morally superior.

By the 1920s, such notions had gone out of fashion. Throughout the decade, restrictions upon what women could and could not do significantly loosened. Not only were American women voting for the first time, they also began exhibiting greater independence in other fashions, such as wearing short dresses, cutting their hair, wearing makeup, and smoking cigarettes. With their new appearances and with their daring actions, these young flappers struck at the roots of American tradition and morality. More and more young women modeled their behavior after freethinking artists, such as the writer Dorothy Parker and the dancer Isadora Duncan. They also talked with increasing knowledge about sex, parroting the theories of Sigmund Freud. Many women began seeking jobs outside of the home, which give them greater economic and social independence. A married woman, however, did not share in these freedoms. She was still expected to function solely in her role as homemaker, which remained the ideal of American womanhood.

Critical Overview

"The Difference" was published twice in 1923, first in June in *Harper's Magazine* and then only a few months later as one of seven stories included in Glasgow's collection *The Shadowy Third*. The volume was primarily comprised of ghost stories and tales of the supernatural with "The Difference" one of the notable exceptions. While the collection was reviewed by most well-known newspapers, Glasgow was primarily a novelist. As such, *The Shadowy Third* received little attention, though most reviewers did comment favorably on Glasgow's latest effort. The *New York Times* reviewer particularly enjoyed the ghost stories, while the *Literary Review* commended Glasgow's "extraordinarily fine" construction and craftsmanship of stories. Reviewer Rebecca Lowrie went on to praise *The Shadowy Third*, finding it "without waste of words, carelessness of phrase, or ill-considered characterization."

Critical attention paid to the story did not greatly increase over the decades. Only as scholars devoted entire volumes to the writings of Glasgow could discussion and analysis of "The Difference" be found, and even then, such commentary was fleeting. This may come as little surprise since Glasgow only preserved 13 short stories over the course of her lengthy career. Glasgow is also remembered as a chronicler of changing times in the South, and "The Difference" does little to add to such a body of work (though it is set in Richmond, Virginia, the location does little to inform the work).

Several Glasgow scholars, however, have made a study of Glasgow's short stories and commented on the place of "The Difference" in the author's body of work. J.R. Raper contends that the stories she wrote during the early 1920s show her development as an artist more so than do the novels of this same period. They also show her interest in examining psychological structure and issues. Other critics have noted Glasgow's increasing understanding of the female consciousness as exemplified in stories from *The Shadowy Third*. Such an understanding of psychological shifting is "adroitly demonstrated" in "The Difference," writes Frederick P. McDowell in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* as "the heroine develops a kinship with her rival, her husband's mistress, as well as jealousy."

Louis Auchincloss, in a general discussion of Glasgow's fiction, contends that the writer "will be remembered for her women, not her men." Indeed, critics have noted that many of the stories in the collection are similar in their portrayal of independent female characters or female characters who must become strong juxtaposed against male characters who are insensitive, stupid, cowardly, and traitorous. While some critics have objected to such fictitious portrayals of men, a practice which Glasgow also employs in her novels, others maintain that that George's actions clearly show him to be inferior to the wife he has betrayed.

One similarity shared by the majority of contemporary critics, however, is their singling out "The Difference" as one of Glasgow's best of the collection. Edgar MacDonald, in his discussion of Glasgow's short stories in a special issue of *The Mississippi Quarterly* devoted entirely to the author, calls "The Difference" "perfectly plotted, a series of

scenes in which the central character learns something about herself, a novel in miniature."

Critics have disagreed in their analysis of the story and the literary devices it employs. For instance, Raper, writing in *From a Sunken Garden*, declares that the story lacks the ironic perspective and comic vision of other of Glasgow's short stories; "its tone is chiefly pathetic, if vaguely amusing; its perspective, that of flat realism." MacDonald, however, directly refutes Raper's argument: "Glasgow handles superbly George's bewilderment over Margaret's taking his little fling so seriously. Raper misses the happily ironic tone. . . but nothing could be more delicious than Margaret swept up in George's protective arms and his telling her she's upset because she's hungry." MacDonald ends his discussion of "The Difference" by calling it a "seriocomic curtain-raiser." Marion K. Richards in *Ellen Glasgow's Development as a Novelist* would likely agree with MacDonald's analysis, finding George's behavior demonstrative of "the satire where she [Glasgow] excels." Unlike these critics, Linda W. Wagner, writing for the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* finds the content more interesting than the form, bluntly calling the story "bitter." She further notes in her book *Ellen Glasgow, Beyond Convention* that Glasgow makes her important statement of the different ways in which men and women think about and speak about love.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses how people are not what they seem in "The Difference."

In the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* noted Glasgow scholar Frederick P. McDowell called Ellen Glasgow "the first truly modern writer in the South." Not only did Glasgow break with tradition when she embraced what was then considered to be an entirely inappropriate activity for a young southern woman— writing—she also used her writing to rebel against traditional values, both in the South and in literature itself. As such, Glasgow was truly a woman ahead of her time. At the beginning of the 20th century, woman's accepted role in society was that of wife and mother, and women were expected to subordinated their interests to those of their husband. As a successful woman writer who never married, Glasgow broke away from this restrictive mode. Although she was raised in a typical southern fashion, and received virtual no encouragement to pursue writing, Glasgow developed into a woman very different from what society would preordain for her.

In her numerous novels as well as in some of her short stories, Glasgow explores many of the problems women and women artists of her time faced. Her autobiography points out the similarities between many of Glasgow's characters and the writer herself. Early in her career, as in her 1913 novel *Virginia*, Glasgow clearly had a hard time imagining, and thus creating, a female character who broke away from her accepted societal role. By mid-life, however, Glasgow had made the choice to live independently and pursue her career instead of marriage and family. As her career and life experiences progressed, Glasgow began a deft exploration of the consciousnesses of women who made similar choices or who were coming to understand the inequality under which they had been living.

Margaret Fleming, the protagonist in Glasgow's 1923 short story "The Difference" is one of those woman in the process of undergoing a lifealtering transformation as she comes to realize that her lifelong subordination to her husband has brought her, not happiness, but a life built upon deceit and unappreciated self-sacrifice. While the story was little noted at the time of its publication (Glasgow was primarily a novelist, penning 19 novels in her almost five-decade-long career) and has received little critical attention in the intervening decades, several scholars have noted the important place it holds in the body of Glasgow's work devoted to examining the female psyche.

As the story opens, Margaret Fleming is beginning to feel the end of the world as she knows it: she has just discovered, via letter, that her husband George has been having an affair with a woman named Rose Morrison. After her initial fear at losing her husband, Margaret decides to sacrifice her own happiness to George's; she visits Rose to announce her intention of giving him up, but when she shares the news with her husband he is shocked and appalled. For George does not love Rose, in fact, he had merely viewed the affair as "recreation." With George's revelation, Margaret realizes she

has nothing left in life, not her belief in the eternal bond of love, not happiness in the life she has led, nor even the sense of moral superiority that would come with giving up what she loves most— George. Margaret's epiphany at the end of "The Difference" understates one of the themes of the story: that people and situations are not always what they seem.

Margaret's saga epitomizes the plight of women in a society where they are allowed little functionality other than being wives and mother. Up until receiving Rose's letter, Margaret has considered herself to lead a contented and fulfilling life. She had always reveled in her ability to make his life comfortable; the very room in which the opening action takes place, the upstairs library, Margaret called "George's room" because everything in it "had been chosen to please him." Margaret also has taken pride in her assistance to George in his work writing a book on the history of law, a book "that could not have been written without her." Until she learns about Rose Morrison, nothing in Margaret's life could make her question her role and importance to George and the choices she has made in her life. Once she does learn of George's betrayal, however, an interesting transformation happens: Margaret immediately acknowledges that her life has not brought her great personal satisfaction. The emergence of the truth about George causes Margaret to face an even greater truth about herself.

While historical studies and Glasgow's own life show the difficulties that turn-of-the-century women had in forging independent lives and careers, "The Difference" focuses on the difficulties that one woman has in recognizing her own true desires and separating them from those of her husband. Margaret's name means "pearl," and her reflections show that she is just that: a small treasure hidden away under a hard, almost indestructible shell. Only upon learning of her husband's treachery does she acknowledge that "the real Margaret, the vital part of her, was hidden far away. . . She knew that there were secrets within herself which she had never acknowledged in her own thoughts; that there were unexpressed longings which had never taken shape even in her own imagination." With these words, Margaret reveals that she has been less than honest with herself and George, and even more importantly, that she finds her life to be significantly lacking. As with many people, only experiencing such personal devastation brings Margaret to this point of brutal self-reflection.

Margaret's confession emphasizes that the role of looking after a husband is not enough to fulfill a woman. Margaret had always equated her caretaking of George with her love for him, and she had previously believed that his acceptance of it— indeed, his need for it—showed his own deep love for her. Learning of his affair makes Margaret realize that he does not love her as she loves him. Further, George's taking a mistress merely for fun instead of for love seems clear evidence to her that he does not recognize her feelings for him as true love, for if he did, she reasons, he would never choose to hurt her so deeply.

Margaret, like many women in her situation, primarily sees George's affair as a betrayal, but not merely one based on sexual infidelity and alienation of affection, but one based on his inability to see beyond the surface Margaret that she presents to the world. During her confrontation with George, she "longed with all her heart to say: 'There were

possibilities in me that you never suspected. I also am capable of a great love. In my heart I also am a creature of romance, of adventure. If you had only known it, you might have found in marriage all you have sought elsewhere. . . .'" But she cannot give voice to these words. To do so would demonstrate to George her newly discovered dissatisfaction with her life. Further, it would make her own disillusioned feelings permanent. For his part, George has made it clear that he follows that dichotomy men often apply to women: the woman they love versus the woman they can have fun with. Margaret had made the critical mistake of believing because she loved George and because he relied upon her, that he loved her in the same way that she loved him.

Dorothy Chambers, Margaret's friend, is the only character in the story who understands that "When a man and a woman talk of love they speak two different languages"; for Margaret love is "a kind of abstract power like religion" but to a man "it is simply the way he feels." Margaret takes on the rather naive tack that if a man "love the other woman, he doesn't love" her. For Margaret, the only kind of love that exists in the one she has practiced throughout her 20 years of marriage to George: a self-sacrificing love. To remain true to "the ideal of self-surrender, which she had learned in the past," Margaret is willing to give up "her greatest happiness" and give George his freedom to be with Rose, for she believes that this and this alone will bring George his greatest happiness. Even at her lowest moment, Margaret can only put the desires of George ahead of her own. In remaining true to herself, Margaret can at least derive some personal satisfaction and "the opportunity to be generous."

For her part, Rose would seem to be the antithesis to Margaret: she is a young Bohemian artist, prone to slovenliness, up-front behavior, and a willingness to speak her mind to get what she wants. However, the reader's first introduction to Rose demonstrates that Rose is not as free as she appears. In Rose's living room Margaret sees "a canary in a gilded cage [that] broke into song as she entered." Clearly, Rose, who "waited alone [in George's villa] for happiness" is like the colorful but caged canary. This parallelism is further emphasized by Rose's clothes which are "dyed in brilliant hues" and by her voice, which is "like the song of a bird." It should come as little surprise, then, to find that Rose and Margaret do share one important similarity: a romantic view of love. Both women believe that because George is having an affair with Rose he truly loves her. By the end of the story, Margaret openly acknowledges this similarity; it seemed to her "that she and this strange girl were united by some secret bond which George could not share— by the bond of woman's immemorial disillusionment.

Of the female characters, only Dorothy appears to have the talent to see people and their actions for what they are. Her ability to straddle the Victorian world and the modern world is demonstrated in her brief appearance, as she speaks of mundane, upperclass matters (charity bridge parties and committee luncheons) but still smokes cigarettes. She also understands the difference with which women and men view love and dispenses practical advice for the forsaken wife ("'For when George ceases to be desirable for sentimental reasons, he will still have his value as a good provider.'"). In a sense, Dorothy is more modern than even Rose as she sees things for what they are, refusing to dress them up in pretty, more acceptable terms. Even Margaret recognizes

Rose's talk of George's need for "selfdevelopment" as one of the "catchwords of the new freedom."

By the end of the story, although Margaret still has George, "She had lost more than love, more than happiness, she had lost her belief in life." Her pleasant world has been turned upside down, her husband has brought into her life a "cheap and tawdry" reality, and she retains none of the dignity which she had previously brought to her existence. Instead, she realizes she had "overplayed life" by endowing serious, deep traits in a man who believes that all she requires to feel better on this fateful day is a "good dinner." Margaret has paid the price for subordinating herself to a husband who is unworthy of her ideals and morality. As Louis Auchincloss stated, "Miss Glasgow's heroines . . . are devastated by her worthless men."

Source: Rena Korb, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton teaches literature and writing classes at Southwestern University. She writes frequently about the short story. In this essay she suggests that Margaret's evasive idealism is at fault for her inability to understand herself and others.

Since Ellen Glasgow used her short stories as a way of practicing new techniques and developing themes, the best of the stories possess the density and richness of her fully-formed novels, and they measure up to the work of her better known contemporaries such as Henry James. Critics generally agree that "The Difference" is one of Glasgow's best and that its drawing-room setting is reminiscent of James's "The Beast in the Jungle." One of the themes that "The Difference" articulates, according to many readers, is woman's moral superiority to man's. But to read the story as a tale of moral superiority—as if that is the main difference between men and women— is to miss Glasgow's subtle social critique and her nuanced understanding to gender relations. "The Difference" is about more than the disparity between women's and men's moral sensibility; it's also about the difference between the Victorian and modern ages, between beauty and substance, and between belief and truth.

Glasgow's characterizations of the differences between George's and Margaret's moral constitutions and attitudes toward love and marriage is more complex than some of her critics give her credit for. Readers of "The Difference" will be tempted to interpret Glasgow's point of view—the entire story is seen through Margaret's eyes—as evidence of her sympathy for the wife. But evidence in the story and in her novel *The Sheltered Life* which contains more fully developed characters based on George and Margaret, reveals Glasgow's more richly textured views of gender differences and the institution of marriage.

One of the hallmarks of Glasgow's fiction is her choice of interior monologue over dialogue, and one of the effects of this stylistic device is that it highlights the difference between the character's perceptions of events on the one hand, and the objective reality and other characters' perceptions on the other hand. In the first scene of "The Difference," for example, Margaret has just received the letter from Rose Morrison informing her that she is in love with George, and is convinced that her twenty-year marriage is over. She engages in domestic small talk with her wayward husband while the "letter in her bosom scorched her as if it were fire." But she's so practiced at managing appearances that she knows "on the surface of her life nothing had changed." She's able to maintain appearances under such emotional strain because that's what she has been trained to do. While she chats with her husband about trivial things, she is aware that "the real Margaret, the vital part of her, was hidden far away in that deep place where the seeds of mysterious impulses and formless desires lie buried."

Margaret practices what Glasgow calls "evasive idealism." That is, she has been trained as a southern woman of the upper class to maintain at all costs the illusion that all is well. Describing the faded beauty Eva, who is modeled after Margaret, another

character in *The Sheltered Life* says: "Even the sanguine brightness of her smile, which seemed to him as transparent as glass, was the mirror, he told himself, of persevering hypocrisy. A living triumph of self-discipline, of inward poise, of the confirmed habit of not wanting to be herself, she had found her reward in that quiet command over circumstances." What motivates Margaret, from the moment she receives the letter then, is not so much a desire to save her marriage as a compulsion to maintain appearances and protect her pride and her husband's reputation.

When Margaret undertakes the journey to call upon Rose Morrison, she crosses entirely from one world to another, from the predictable and safe home of the Victorian woman to the unknown and volatile domain of the modern woman. But despite her inner turmoil, Margaret's commitment to the doctrine of evasive idealism ensures that nothing on the surface of her life appear different. Having fulfilled all George's requests—ordering flowers for a funeral, mending and laying out his clothes— Margaret then turns her attention to her troubles. She assures herself that "now that she had attended to the details of existence, she would have time for the problem of living." When she leaves her comfortable and fashionable house, Margaret believes that "the door closed sharply on her life of happiness." She doesn't believe she can change the facts of the relationship between George and Rose; her only ambition is to preserve dignity and maintain appearances. She is thwarted in even this modest goal, however, when she discovers that Rose does not share the same values, that she is different.

Margaret can tell immediately that Rose is a new woman because she greets her "with the clear and competent eyes of youth," and "an infallible self-esteem." Margaret finds her "vulgar" and "a picture of barbaric beauty." But the object that seems to embody all the differences between the two women is the "queer piece of rope" that holds Rose's kimono-like dress closed. This piece of cording represents to Margaret everything she isn't and everything she fears. On one level she realizes that the tied belt is a casual, contingent closure that signals sexual liberation and availability. But it also signifies an entire set of beliefs and attitudes that threaten not only Margaret's marriage to George, but her entire worldview as well. Rose's appearance indicates that she has betrayed the code of womanhood to which Margaret has dedicated her life. It's not just that "her fingernails needed attention; and beneath the kimonolike garment, a frayed place showed at the back of her stocking," it's that she has refused to commit herself to the maintenance of appearances that Margaret believes is every woman's duty, and to which she believes George also subscribes. As Margaret puts it, "the girl was careless about those feminine details by which George declared so often that he judged a woman." Suspecting that "this physical negligence extended to the girl's habit of thought," Margaret soon discovers that the George of Rose's imagination doesn't even resemble the reserved Victorian to whom she has been married for more than twenty years.

Reeling from the dissonance between Rose and herself, Margaret must then wrestle with yet another fundamental difference. Rose claims to have discovered or liberated the "real" George. She accuses Margaret of misjudging her husband and insists that "he is so big, so strong and silent, that it would take an artist to understand him." Margaret begins to think that her privileging of surface over substance may have led her to

misjudge her own husband. Interested only in the outer surface of her own subjectivity, Margaret has come to believe that she need only attend to her husband's surfaces as well. The encounter with Rose makes her wonder for a moment if George possesses "profounder depths of feeling that she had ever reached" or cultivated "some secret garden of romance where she had never entered." Glasgow pulls back on Margaret's opportunity for genuine self-reflection, however, and Margaret fails to seize the chance for epiphany and real change. Preparing to confront her husband with Rose's claims that he is in love with her and willing to sacrifice herself for his happiness, Margaret "slipped into her prettiest tea gown" and "reflected that even renunciation was easier when one looked desirable." In other words, her only defense against and preparation for this decisive moment is to look pretty.

Margaret's commitment to the doctrine of evasive idealism has never wavered. Though she faces serious challenges to her worldview when she must confront several instances of difference, she cannot or will not seize the opportunity. Readers and critics who see this stance as noble misread Glasgow's attitude toward her character. Glasgow is less interested in dramatizing Margaret's stoic martyrdom or in proving that George is a cad (he is), than she is in critiquing Margaret's adherence to an oppressive and retrograde code. When Margaret finds out that George's affair with Rose is only casual and cannot be recast into a beautiful and noble drama, she is devastated: "So it was all wasted! Nothing that she could do could lift the situation above the level of the commonplace, the merely vulgar. She was defrauded not only of happiness, but even of the opportunity to be generous." The story ends in the drawing room where it started and George and Margaret's life together is no different. George appeals to her desire to make-believe all is well and suggests that the only problem is that she's nervous and hungry. Margaret succumbs both to his embrace and to his outrageous lie that nothing has happened.

Source: Elisabeth Piedmont-Marton, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture, specializing in cinema studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses the theme of the "difference" in the protagonist's perception of her exterior social manners and her interior emotional life.

Ellen Glasgow's short story "The Difference" opens shortly after Margaret Fleming, a woman of middle age, has read a letter from one Rose Morrison, informing her of an ongoing affair with George, Margaret's husband of twenty years. The story's title focuses on the theme of the "difference" in Margaret's perception of her husband, her marriage, the world around her and even herself, as a result of receiving this shocking information. The "difference" also refers to the difference in the signifi- cance of the extra-marital affair to George and to Margaret, as well as the general "difference" in women's versus men's perceptions of marriage, romance and infidelity. While Margaret's perceptions of her entire life are reorganized as a result of this sudden revelation, she also develops a sense of the "difference" between her external behavior toward others and her internal thoughts, feelings and urges.

Ellen Glasgow's writing has been noted as a fiction of "manners," which critiques the hollow social niceties of upper middle class Southern Victorian society. Stephanie Bronson has noted that "Glasgow satirized the conventions of her society, especially as they effected women, but always with a degree of self-reflection." In this story, the main character becomes aware, perhaps for the first time, of her surface level social gestures and behaviors which belie a more complex internal psychology. Thus, while her illusions about her marriage are punctured, and she begins to see around her a different world from that in which she had imagined she'd been living for the past twenty years (for "never until this afternoon had she felt that the wind was sweeping away the illusion of happiness by which she lived"), she becomes all the more aware of her own disingenuousness in her interactions with others. In the following essay, I will examine the moments of Margaret's afternoon after her discovery of her husband's affair in which she becomes painfully aware of the "difference" between her behavior toward others and her inner self.

"On the surface of her life nothing had changed." Yet, in discovering her husband's ongoing secret life in an affair with a younger woman, Margaret discovers that she, too, leads a secret internal life she was not even aware of:

But the real Margaret, the vital part of her, was hidden far away in that deep place where the seeds of mysterious impulses and formless desires lie buried. She knew that there were secrets within herself which she had never acknowledged in her own thoughts; that there were unexpressed longings which had never taken shape even in her imagination.

In learning of his secret affair, Margaret begins to wonder if her husband, too, hides beneath his supreme civility toward her secret depths of passion and emotion equal to

her own: "Was there in George, she asked now, profounder depths of feeling than she had ever reached; was there some secret garden of romance where she had never entered? Was George larger, wilder, more adventurous in imagination, than she had dreamed? Had the perfect lover lain hidden in his nature, awaiting only the call of youth?" It is the realization that her husband harbors a hidden passion, as evidenced by his affair with the beautiful artist, that leads Margaret to the realization that she, too, harbors secret, primitive, "savage" passions within her, for "Somewhere beneath the civilization of the ages there was the skeleton of the savage."

With this knowledge of her own hidden desires, as well as the depths of pain she hides at the discovery of her husband's affair, Margaret becomes increasingly aware of the "superficial" nature of her interactions with him, as well as with others around her. When George comes home, and before she admits to him her knowledge of his affair, their interactions are no different from their daily interactions of the past twenty years, yet, as she speaks to him, she "knew it was only the superficial self that was speaking." And, when she smiles up at him in what appears to be perfect sincerity, "it was a smile that hurt her with its irony." Her face indeed becomes a mask of insincere civility, over which she barely has control: "The expression on her face felt as stiff as a wax mask, and though she struggled to relax her muscles, they persisted in that smile of inane cheerfulness." Even a visit from Dorothy, her dearest friend, becomes an exercise in insincere expressions of warmth, for "her welcome was hollow, and at the very instant when she returned her friend's kiss she was wishing that she could send her away. That was one of the worst things about suffering; it made one indifferent and insincere." Throughout their visit, Margaret's face continues to compulsively mask her emotions, so that, "she asked herself if Dorothy could look into her face and not see the difference?"

As Margaret dresses to go out and confront her husband's mistress, she makes a metaphor of the "veil" she wears, as "she reflected, with bitter mirth, that only in novels could one hide one's identity behind a veil." And yet, Margaret continues to hide her inner identity behind the veil of her well-bred manners and mask-like facial expressions. Even when she confronts Rose face to face, she compulsively hides her true emotions behind her gracious manners: "and though she tried to make her voice insolent, the deep instinct of good manners was greater than her effort." Furthermore, Rose Morrison's "candidness" and "sincerity" make Margaret all the more aware of her own insincerity and hidden emotion. The younger woman's "barbaric simplicity of emotion" in contrast to Margaret's repressed formality "repels" her. Rose further emphasizes her motivation in writing Margaret the letter in the name of "sincerity"; she tells Margaret that, "I felt we owed you the truth." Rose Morrison's unguarded expression of her feelings for Margaret's husband becomes an implicit critique of the older woman's inability to match outward expression to inner feeling. "I know that subterfuge and lies and dishonesty cannot bring happiness," Rose declares. Yet Margaret continues to contort her face in the service of hiding her emotions; as she speaks to Rose, "Her lips felt cracked with the effort she made to keep them from trembling."

In preparing to confront her husband the evening after meeting Rose Morrison, Margaret, impelled by a desire to evoke his hidden passion for her own sake, "slipped into her prettiest tea gown," and "touched her pale lips with color." But even this late

attempt at donning the accoutrements of passion and romance becomes only another false attempt to bring life to a dead marriage, for, even as she does so, she thinks defeatedly that, "'. . . it is like painting the cheeks of the dead.'" In her vain and abortive attempt to kindle a long-repressed passion with her husband, when she confronts him that evening with her knowledge of the affair, Margaret envisions herself as an actress, or a simple doll, a "marionnette," playing a "scene," rather than a sincere woman in an emotionally intimate encounter with the man she loves.

While she sat there she realized that she had no part or place in the scene before her. Never could she speak the words that she longed to utter. Never could she make him understand the real self behind the marionette at which he was looking. She longed with all her heart to say: "There were possibilities in me that you never suspected. I also am capable of a great love. In my heart I also am a creature of romance, of adventure. If you had only known it, you might have found in marriage all that you have sought elsewhere. . ." This was what she longed to cry out. . .

Despite these longings, however, Margaret is unable to express such sentiments to her husband. Again, it seems that she is incapable of the sincerity which would allow her face to express, and mouth to utter, her true feelings: "Her heart was filled with noble words, with beautiful sentiments, but she could not make her lips pronounce them in spite of all the efforts she made."

While discovering her husband's secret affair has made Margaret supremely aware of both her own hidden depths of passion and her surface level insincerity—the tragedy for her becomes, not the jealousy aroused by her knowledge of the affair, but the disillusionment of finding that the affair is not evidence of a repressed romantic in George, but merely of an unimaginative man who compares an extra-marital dalliance to a game of golf.

During their exchange in which she confronts him about his affair, Margaret, already hyper-aware of her own mask of civility, becomes painfully aware of the artificiality of her husband's surface level responses to her. When she greets George that evening, even the light by which she now sees him is described as "artificial." Margaret notes in George's initial response to her admission of knowledge of the affair that his face expresses, not any strong emotional response, but simply "emptiness." He looks at her with an expression which holds "nothing" but "the blankness of complete surprise." As their conversation about the affair continues, Margaret notices a variety of gestures and facial expressions on her husband which communicate nothing more than a façade of civility designed to "hide" any true emotion. At one point in the conversation, "he coughed abruptly as if he were trying to hide his embarrassment." When he responds to one of her statements by repeating it as a question, she again describes him as "trying to hide behind that hollow echo." His facial expressions become to her merely "mechanical" gestures, made in effort to hide a "vacant" heart; watching his response, at one point, "it seemed to her that only mechanical force could jerk his jaw back into place and close the eyelids over his vacant blue eyes." Finally, when George closes the discussion by suggesting they go eat their dinner, "his face cleared as if by magic."

Again, Margaret perceives the trick of illusion, described as "magic," by which her husband responds to her.

Margaret's sense of herself as an actress merely playing the part of the scorned wife becomes an awareness that she has completely misinterpreted the play in which she is acting. "She felt like an actress who has endowed a comic part with the gesture of high tragedy. It was not, she saw clearly now, that she had misunderstood George, but that she has overplayed life." In other words, she now sees her own part in her marriage as an "act" which she has "overplayed," or endowed with romance and melodramatic emotion, but which is really the "comic" part of the wife who has made a fool of herself by believing in the "illusion" of her husband's love for her. Thus, while Margaret discovers that her "act," her façade of good manners, hides a deeper sense of self, the realization that her husband's "act" hides nothing but "emptiness" beneath his façade of good manners is what ultimately leaves Margaret having "lost her belief in life."

Source: Liz Brent, for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #4

Recognizing the characters in "The Difference" as types drawn from an earlier story, MacDonald discusses the way Glasgow uses them in the later story to illustrate how "the doubleness of male adultery is the counterpart of female ambivalence."

Henry Anderson is nowhere apparent in "Whispering Leaves," but he is very much present in "The Difference," which appeared in the June issue of Harper's. Six years after writing the happy "Thinking Makes it So," Glasgow saw there was a better story to be extracted from the materials of the earlier effort. Vardah and Harold had really been a companionable study team, a "marriage of true minds," rather than a dalliance in the garden. "The Difference" is perfectly plotted, a series of scenes in which the central character learns something about herself, a novel in miniature. A cataloging of external details is limited to a few poetic images carrying psychological significance. The central intelligence is again named Margaret. "But the real Margaret, the vital part of her, was hidden far away in that deep place where the seeds of mysterious impulses and formless desires lie buried." In this study of the "Margaret" psyche, Glasgow separates the external rose alter-ego of "Thinking" into a separate entity named Rose. George, described in Henry Anderson terms, is a faithful-faithless husband, loving Margaret but dallying with Rose, an early sketch for George Birdsong in *The Sheltered Life*. Meeker sees Glasgow returning to "man's moral inferiority to woman." but surely the story illustrates a more telling truth: the doubleness of male adultery is the counterpart of female ambivalence, the Margaret-Rose syndrome. As one of the secondary characters observes, "When a man and a woman talk of love they speak two different languages. They can never understand each other because women love with their imaginations and men with their senses."

The dramatic structure suggests drawing-room comedy, similar in feeling to James's "The Beast in the Jungle." The series of carefully set scenes is the "outside" of the interior drama, the discovery of multiple selves. "Outside, in the autumn rain, the leaves were falling," doubtless revealing outlines of bare trees. As a tragi-comedy, such as several of her later works will be, living is a series of improvisations. A letter from the other woman arrives. George enters briefly with domestic requests while the letter burns in Margaret's bosom. A visitor intrudes, chatting about a domestic crisis in another household, a parallel that makes Margaret determine to confront the other woman. She leaves the ordered comfort of her in-city home to venture by streetcar to an unfashionable suburban villa. Here Miss Glasgow describes accurately a trip from central Richmond, through the Northern suburbs, to Lakeside, but it is also a symbolic trip, from past security to contemporary transience. Modern, redhaired Rose Morrison is an artist. "Only an artist," Margaret decides, "could be at once so arrogant with destiny and so ignorant of life." Margaret, as a beautiful Victorian, will give up her husband. She clings to "the law of sacrifice, the ideal of selfsurrender". On the ride home in the lurching streetcar, she charitably envisions a "remorseful" George. "What agony of mind he must have endured in these past months, these months they had worked so quietly side by side on his book." Returned home, Margaret is met by a concerned husband. Glasgow handles superbly George's bewilderment over Margaret's taking his little fling

so seriously. Raper misses the happily ironic tone of "Thinking Makes it So" in "The Difference" but nothing could be more delicious than Margaret swept up in George's protective arms and his telling her she's upset because she's hungry. As Edmonia would shortly make clear in *The Romantic Comedians*, a good appetite is the best remedy for disillusionment; living on duty upsets the digestion. Glasgow is accused of being unfair to males, but her treatment of George, while comic, is not devoid of amused comprehension. Like most males he may have romantic fantasies about other women, but he is realistic enough to admit that he is only one of a series for the Roses of the world and that his basic comforts lie at home with Margaret. As a type George will reappear like a popular film star in later comedies. In this serio-comic curtain-raiser, brief images of leaves, fires, rain, flowers, mirrors are used tellingly, suggesting the four elements and the humors they engender. . . .

Source: Edgar MacDonald, "From Jordan's End to Frenchman's Bend: Ellen Glasgow's Short Stories," in *Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 2, Spring, 1996, pp. 319ff.

Topics for Further Study

Conduct research to find out more about women's roles in the early-20th century. Use this information to more thoroughly compare and contrast Margaret Fleming and Rose Morrison.

Choose one of the artistic movements of early- 20th century America, such as realism in literature or cubism in the visual arts, to investigate. Then imagine you are a journalist, and write an article about this movement.

Read one of Ellen Glasgow's novels. How do the characters, situations, and gender roles compare to those in "The Difference" ?

Find out more about the Bohemians in Greenwich Village. Do you think Rose Morrison accurately reflects their sensibility?

Imagine that you are a psychologist. How would you analyze Margaret Fleming's actions and motivations in the story? (Conduct research as necessary.)

Compare and Contrast

1920s: In 1925, 175,000 divorces take place— 1.5 per 1,000 total population. Obtaining a divorce when both parties do not agree to it is usually a difficult proposition. Most state courts only grant a divorce under fault grounds, such as adultery, alcoholism, desertion, or mental or physical cruelty. A person seeking a divorce on a fault ground must prove that the spouse committed the fault. A spouse also may contest the divorce. Thus, if a man wants a divorce in order to marry another women, firstly, he might have no grounds under which to get the divorce, and secondly, his wife might contest it.

1990s: In 1990 there were 1,182,000 divorces among the American population—4.7 per 1,000 total population. If this trend continues, younger Americans marrying for the first time have a 40 to 50 percent chance of divorcing in their lifetime. By the mid-1990s, around 18 million Americans have experienced a divorce. Despite these disheartening statistics, Americans continue to wholeheartedly support the idea of marriage and "until death do us part." Ninety-six percent of Americans express a personal desire to marry, and only 8 percent of American women would prefer to remain single rather than marry. Additionally, almost three-quarters of Americans believe marriage is a lifelong commitment, one that should be broken only under extreme circumstances.

1920s: Cubism, dadaism, and surrealism are all new artistic movements that develop among European artists. Cubist painters, such as Pablo Picasso, create pictures out of geometric forms, shapes, and designs. Dadaism denounces all conventional standards, as epitomized by Marcel Duchamp's painting of the Mona Lisa wearing a mustache. Surrealist painters, such as Salvador Dali, attempt to capture the unconscious and the world of dreams. A school of American painters focus on depicting the urban landscape in an exploration of how the machine age has influenced society. For instance, Edward Hopper's paintings of New York City convey a sense of loneliness.

1990s: The field of visual arts offers many formats. Some artists implement modern technologies; video artists flash words and pictures across television screens. Artists mount largescale installations, sometimes recreating entire rooms or scenes, often using multiple media. Other pieces mounted throughout the decade are interactive, inviting the viewer to become a piece of the artwork.

1920s: Twenty-three percent of all American women aged 14 and older are employed outside of the home. In 1920, women make up 20 percent of the workforce, but few hold professional jobs; instead, women tend to employed as domestics and servants. Married women suffer from discrimination, earning as much as 30 percent less than their single counterparts and sometimes being forbidden from entering certain professions, such as schoolteaching.

1990s: By the beginning of the decade, around 48 million women, aged 16 and over, are employed. These women make up about 44 percent of the American workforce. Women continue to be treated unequally, however. They generally earn less money than men.

1920s: As they witness what they believe to the breakdown of moral standards, community, religious, and government groups begin a program of censorship to prevent the exposure of media featuring coarse language, radical political ideas, and discussions of sex. "Obscene" books, such as James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* are banned from U.S. publication, and Hollywood sets up a review board to screen movie content.

1990s: The National Endowment for the Arts continues to be attacked by conservatives for funding artists whose work some consider to be obscene. The Recording Industry Association of America places warning labels on records that contain graphic sexual or violent lyrics. Some school and town libraries pull books from the shelves due to perceived improprieties.

What Do I Read Next?

Glasgow's autobiography, *The Woman Within*, published in 1954, presents an intimate portrait of the writer and recounts the difficulties of being a woman writer.

A Certain Measure (1943) collects Glasgow's meditations on the art of fiction.

Glasgow's novel *Virginia* (1913) demonstrates what happens when a woman believes that marriage requires self-sacrifice.

Like "The Difference," Edith Wharton's short story "Roman Fever" (1934) challenges Victorian morality and ideals, while exploring a pivotal moment in a woman's life.

Willa Cather's 1915 novel, *The Song of the Lark* depicts an opera singer forced to chose between her career and her friends and family. Members of her community, who do not believe that women should be artists, alienate the heroine as she pursues her career.

F. Scott Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925) both explore the Jazz Age generation that emerged in the 1920s. These novels reveal the new morals and cynical attitude of younger Americans.

The Group (1963) by Mary McCarthy follows the lives of several women who have just graduated from college in the early 1930s. Their stories fascinatingly detail the changing morality as well as the roles that women of that decade took on.

Further Study

Auchincloss, Louis. *Pioneers and Caretakers, A Study of Nine American Women Novelists.*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961.

A series of essays discussing important women writers of the late-19th through mid-20th centuries. Auchincloss examines the roles these writers play in preserving American tradition while expanding literary boundaries.

Godbold, E. Stanly, Jr. *Ellen Glasgow and the Woman Within*, Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1972.

A complete biography of Ellen Glasgow that discusses her life and her work. Includes photographs.

Holman, C. Hugh. *Three Modes of Southern Fiction, Ellen Glasgow, William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe*, Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1966.

A discussion of how the works of Glasgow, Faulkner, and Wolfe present various aspects of life in the South and southern history, and conversely, how the southern culture affected the development of these novelists.

Inge, Thomas M., ed. *Ellen Glasgow, Centennial Essays,* Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1976.

A collection of critical essays on Glasgow's writings, including discussion of Glasgow's novels and philosophical ideals.

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Auchincloss, Louis. *Pioneers and Caretakers, A Study of Nine American Women Novelists*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961, pp. 56-91.

Lowrie, Rebecca. A review of *The Shadowy Third and Other Stories*, in the *Literary Review*, November 17, 1923, p. 256.

MacDonald, Edgar. "From Jordan's End to Frenchman's Bend: Ellen Glasgow's Short Stories," in *The Mississippi Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 2, 1996, pp. 319-332.

McDowell, Frederick P.W. "Ellen Glasgow," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 9, Part II, Gale, 1981, pp. 44-65.

Raper, Julius Rowan. *From the Sunken Garden, The Fiction of Ellen Glasgow, 1916-1945*, Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1980.

Richards, Marion K. *Ellen Glasgow's Development as a Novelist*, The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1971.

Wagner, Linda W. "Ellen Glasgow," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 12, Gale, 1982, pp. 213-226.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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