

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-12113-2 - Ellen Glasgow: The Contemporary Reviews
Edited by Dorothy M. Scura
Excerpt
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THE DESCENDANT

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THE DESCENDANT

A Novel

“Man is not above Nature, but in Nature”

HAECKEL



NEW YORK
HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS

1897

Outlook, 55 (27 March 1897), 855

From [Harper & Brothers] comes *The Descendant*, an anonymous novel of the strenuous kind which exhibits untrained force. There is passionate intensity in the story of the despised illegitimate boy who becomes a fierce Socialist editor, a misanthrope, and a misogynist; his failure to carry out his theories in his personal life, his imprisonment for manslaughter, and his death in the home of the one woman who has loved him and whom he has ill-treated, make a gloomy, painful tale, but one written with considerable power.

Laurence Hutton,
 “Literary Notes,”
Harper’s Magazine, 94
 (April 1897), 549

A very strong, and a very unusual, piece of fiction is *The Descendant*, by an author who chooses to remain anonymous. The hero is an Ishmaelite who began life by cursing and hating everybody, from his father, whom he called a villain, to his mother, whom he called a fool. His hand was against every man, and every man’s hand was against him. He hurled defiance at law and order, until he was brought to order by the power of the law. As a journalist and a writer upon *The Iconoclast*, he had much of the power of Ibsen, and all Ibsen’s audacity. He left nothing unassailed. He had a genius for upsetting and destroying. His lecture upon “Social Lies” set society ablaze. “Life is an apple,” he cried, when he was twenty-six. “It has

three stages: first, the rind, which is sour—cynicism; next, the pulp, which is sweet—optimism; and third, the core, which is rotten—pessimism. Well,” he added, “I’ve tried the first. I skipped the second; and I’m pretty well into the third.” He certainly skipped the second, and before he consumed his apple he existed entirely upon the core. Across his path, and into his life, came a woman quite as well and as powerfully drawn as he is. A wholesome young person, as her creator describes her, with a well-regulated nervous system and great power of self-absorption. When she expended herself she expended herself utterly. There was no half measure in her concentration. Her work demanded her time, and she yielded it; it demanded her vitality, and she yielded that as well. She was a woman both strong and tender, a woman in the beginning of her career as innocent and as impulsive as a child. The story of their association, a delicate subject, is handled with great delicacy. They were both the victims of adverse circumstances, and, perhaps, the fault was not altogether their own. They were both Descendants. And the laws of heredity cannot always be broken.

It is a tragic tale in which there is nothing light or humorous. It preaches degeneration as strongly as Nordau did; and it preaches despair. It is a deep study of the sad and serious sides of human affairs. As a story it is exciting, and it is what is called “thought-compelling.” It is rarely dull. It is well considered, and it is well handled. It is bound to create no little comment. And the reading world will wonder who the unknown author can be.

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“By the Great Unknown,”
Chap-Book, 6 (1 April
 1897), 403–4

Centuries ago, William Camden found “what’s bred in the bone will never out of the flesh,” a fact sufficiently obvious to the multitude from the beginning to have passed into a proverb. Nowadays, men devote volumes to plethoric proof of it, and call it “working out a problem in heredity.” Such was the purpose of the anonymous author of *The Descendant*. The title indicates it, and the headings of the four divisions of the work approve it. Its motto is Haeckel’s “Man is not above Nature, but in Nature.” The first of its books bears the legend, *Omne vivum ex ovo*, it ends with Dead Sea apples, Schopenhauer and Ibsen are served between, its Nietzsche-like protagonist flavors it throughout; yet man is left a free moral agent, and the essential sweetness of life remains unimpugned at its close.

The hero, Michael Akershem, was born out of wedlock—his father being a villain and his mother a fool, as he himself abruptly characterizes them. The mother, a woman of the fields, dies, the father remains undisclosed, and the child is taken by a neighboring farmer. When the story opens he is a swineherd; but he grows up a scholar, an innate longing for knowledge seeming to commingle with an understanding that it affords an escape from odious surroundings. In the first flush of youth Akershem leaves his birthplace in Virginia and goes to New York, where he soon becomes editor of *The Iconoclast*, an Ishmaelitish journal devoted to the justification of its name at the expense of existing social conditions. He achieves something better than mere notoriety by the force of his writings; he loves and is

loved by a young artist from the South, whom he treats much as his father treated his mother. He is taken to task for it by his best friend and early patron; he kills a devoted admirer when frenzied with the rebuke, and serves his term in the state’s prison. Eventually, he comes back to die in the arms of his first love—an ending wholly conventional to a story in many respects remarkable.

While the book is forcefully written, disclosing a hand skillful in the treatment, and a perception discriminating in the choice of materials, the chief character is elusive and self-contradictory. He is the slave of heredity and of environment in unstable equilibrium,—like the rest of us,—which leaves proof of his creator’s theme unpleasantly suspended. The love affair is charmingly told, but it lacks coherence and probability. Akershem perpetually sways between that hatred for society, for which both his birth and early training are responsible, and the desire of civilized man to establish a home, due both to nature and his surroundings. And in the final catastrophe there is nothing of inherence or imminence but the mere frenzy of a mind over-wrought by a conscience arbitrarily developed. And the arbitrariness so apparent in this is to be noted in a score of minor details.

All that the author has done by the intrusion of a point of view is to confuse a character in which the results of instinct and example are too perfectly intertwined to be quite true, when considered either as philosophy, nature, or art. Yet, *The Descendant* presents phases of modern thought rarely dealt with in fiction, is both able and daring in its treatment of them, and is readable and worthy of reading.

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[More information](#)

“An Iconoclastic Hero,”
New York Times
Saturday Review of
Books and Art, 17 April
 1897, p. 7

You scent catastrophe in *The Descendant*. There is going to be human smash-up, and on the first page you note that the victim must be Michael Akershem. Michael is of a dubious lineage. His youth is unhappy. He feeds the swine. The better portion in him finds some slight chance when he meets a kind-hearted minister. There is awakened in him a thirst for knowledge. He picks up an education as he can, then gets somehow or other to civilization and New York, and at first he starves.

Michael's opportunity, a risky one, comes at last. There is a newspaper written for demagogues, and at heart a savage is a natural demagogue, and of that kind is the man of *The Descendant*. In time Michael becomes the brains of *The Iconoclast*, and the mission of this sheet and of its editor is to fight everything and everybody.

Rachel Gavin, a Southern girl, an art student, is far too good for Michael, but the two fall in love and live together. Then Michael meets another young person, Anna Allard, who is honesty and purity combined, who sees no reason why she should not follow the “conventional” laws which govern this world. She is no new woman. Anna might have loved Michael, but his wildness affrights her.

There is a loud-mouthed blatherskite, Kyle, who is in *The Iconoclast* office. It may be Anna Allard who has brought about in the journalistic Ishmael a change of heart, for Michael begins to question

the wild theories he has advanced in his paper. In a quarrel with Kyle, Akershem kills him. Then Michael very properly goes to prison. When he regains his liberty his strength has left him—he has consumption. His condition is pitiful. He finds Rachel once more. “You are so steadfast,” he said, and she kissed him, for he knew he was forgiven. Then came back some little of his fearless spirit, and he gasped: “Give me half a chance and I will be even with the world at last.” But upon his lips was set the blood-red seal of fate. Michael died then, but what did Michael mean by being “even with [the] world at last”?

The anonymous author of *The Descendant* has uncommon vigor and feels the dramatic situation. If the story is a painful one, such was the intention of the author. We are not always to be amused, and supposably it is not a necessity for novel readers to be always laughing. Novels which are “hard packed” when treating of social conditions, as of human sufferings, to be impressive want a return at times to natural, commonplace conditions; then the contrasts become the stronger. Schopenhauer and Ibsen are unwholesome sources to drink from.

Bookman, 5 (May 1897),
 368–70

The identification of the author of *The Descendant* with Miss Ellen Glasgow will come as a surprise to those who have read the book. Not since Miss Katharine Pearson Woods published her first story, *Metzerott Shoemaker*, about eight years ago, in the same manner, have we had in this country an anonymous novel which by its masculine force and vigour in characterisation, and in its treatment of certain

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phases of life, was so deceptive as to the sex of its author. In both cases we can trace back some of the influences that operated in producing such striking and remarkable effects in these initial performances to heredity and education. Miss Glasgow was born in Richmond, Va., just twenty-two years ago. She is sprung from an old and prominent Virginian family, and is of Scotch-Irish descent. During the last six years she has pursued the study of physical science and political economy with unremitting ardour, and her familiars in the book-world are Spencer, Darwin, Haeckel, Huxley, Romanes, Mill, Bagehot, Clifford, and Weissmann. This has given her imaginative work a scientific basis, and has developed her poetic sense of things into a concreteness of form that rarely is found in the work of women. George Eliot is the grand exception, and it is this tendency in Miss Glasgow which presumably has caused some of her loving friends to advertise her rashly in the same category. She will be wise not to heed such indiscriminate praise, but to be faithful to her own ideal. There is sufficient power and originality together with a love of beauty in her first book to lift it above the ordinary, and to make us look forward with eagerness for her next work in fiction. It is certainly difficult to explain the marked sympathy with the mystery of pain and the tragedy of failure in the work of one so young and adolescent. Such deep sympathy comes from intuition rather than from knowledge, and betokens the possession of that high order of mind which we call genius, but which often lacks staying power. If Miss Glasgow will nurse her powers carefully and work conscientiously, without haste or pressure from without, we shall hope for something from her pen which may justify the unusual promise of *The Descendant*. But if publishers and editors constrain her, she is lost.

Boston *Evening Transcript*, 1 May 1897, p. 20

The new anonymous book, *The Descendant*, is unquestionably a strong book, but the strength is that of bitter aloes. It is full of color and passion, acute character study and careful description, and sparkles with epigram. But it is not pleasant as a whole, in spite of certain passages here and there delightful in themselves, for the dominant note is cynically bitter. Not that the author has made it so intentionally; one rather obtains the impression that he would willingly have had it otherwise, but that he is overpowered by his motive. The central figure, Akershem, is the child of shame, and is reared in an atmosphere of sordid toil. Escaping from this at nineteen, embittered against the world thus early, he presently becomes the editor of a socialist paper in New York, and further we need not pursue his history here, beyond saying that it is of absorbing interest. Carefully studied as this character is, the author has not succeeded in making it fully consistent. A man of his stamp would not have wavered as did Akershem in the crisis of his life. His life was a protest against social laws and customs, and any deference to them is more or less out of character. It is nevertheless a very true touch which makes this scoffer at marriage so bitterly resent the fact of his own illegitimacy. Like many another bitter enemy of society, Akershem finds himself unable to contend successfully against it. What he does not see, however, is that he and those like him are but beating their heads against the wall. He cannot realize that society is stronger than the individual; that no successful revolt is possible in which society itself does not take part. But the Akershems do not perceive this,

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and it is this imperfect vision of theirs that makes such a book as *The Descendant* sad reading.

Literary World, 28 (15 May 1897), 164

Whatever faults may be urged against this novel by an anonymous author, lack of strength is not among them. The book is distinctly, almost audaciously, virile and vigorous. It is a study of heredity, exemplified in the career of a fatherless and friendless boy of nameless parentage, who escapes from the bondage of a small Virginia village, and gradually makes a mark in New York as the editor of an iconoclastic newspaper. It is also a study—a terribly distinct one—in selfishness. Michael Akershem, stung and maddened by his own disappointments and annoyances, flings himself upon the social order and does his best to destroy it; but he has scarcely a throb of personal sympathy for the down-trodden and suffering folk whose cause he is avowedly espousing. He excites and exasperates them into fierce resistance to their real and imaginary wrongs—to hate capital, law, the marriage tie, and restraint of every kind; but to go among them, to personally interest himself in them, would never have occurred to him as possible, so, as the “gift” without the giver is bare, his efforts recoil in himself, and his selfishness poisons all that might have been sweet to him, and life is a failure, and the tale and the moral of the tale are alike lamentable. For love is the one sweet drop in the world’s cup, and without it the draught is bitter indeed.

William Morton Payne,
“Recent Fiction,”
Dial, 22 (16 May 1897),
310–11

The anonymous author of *The Descendant* is unduly oppressed with the doctrine of heredity. His thesis seems to be that the invidious bar of birth lies athwart the best intentions and the most resolute character, shaping the life in spite of itself. This thesis is worked out in the character of a man whose childhood has been hopelessly embittered by the slurs cast upon it on account of illegitimacy, who leaves his country home for the city, who throws his whole energy into journalism of a radically socialistic and destructive type, who wins only to scorn the love of the woman who might have saved him, and whose maturer realization of the folly of his course results only in a fit of passion that makes him a murderer and lands him in a felon’s cell. The book is undeniably strong, and rises to the height of genuine passion in its climacteric scenes; but it is crude in the working-out of many of its episodes, and is rather suggestive of future possibilities than the earnest of achieved mastery.

“*The Descendant*,”
Critic, n.s. 27 (22 May
1897), 352–3

This is a strong book, and, like most strong books, it is not continuously agreeable. If you enjoy the sensation of being out in a tornado, beaten and buffeted and driven

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on by wind and rain, then you will enjoy the maelstrom of emotions and experiences in which the characters of this novel move and have their being; but if you like to be aware subconsciously of the snap of the hearth-fire, the bubbling of the kettle and the purring of the kitten as you read, you may be sure that it is not a book for you. It is a study of the evolution of character in contact with life in some of its bitterest aspects. . . .

If Hall Caine had written this novel, the world would have said that it was one of his most powerful stories, and much more coherent and artistic than anything he had previously done. Whether the world will be prepared to accord an equal measure of appreciation to an anonymous American author remains to be seen. The writer is evidently a woman. This is made manifest, not by any absence of virility, but by the presence of certain delicacies of insight, such as no man could be expected to exhibit. The book is very brilliantly written, but it is a testimony to its engrossing human interest that the reader can absorb page after page of shrewd and epigrammatic observations and hardly be aware of it. Such a book deserves success—and this one, we believe, has won it.

Clarence Wellford,
 “The Author of *The
 Descendant*,”
Harper’s Bazar, 30 (5
 June 1897), 458

There was a gasp of amazement when Miss Ellen Glasgow walked out of my study the other day, and I turned to the

remaining callers and said, “That young girl wrote *The Descendant*.”

“Wrote *The Descendant*!” some one exclaimed. “Why, she looks as if she had spent her life dancing the german!”

Never did appearance so belie a person’s occupation. This bright-looking young girl, with keen brown eyes and chestnut hair and the very daintiest of hands and feet, after one winter of dancing, renounced society for her own chosen pursuits.

No one knew she wrote, for she is both reserved and sensitive, and although she has been given to literary composition ever since she could hold a pencil, nothing had ever been shown to the world, except a short story called “A Woman of Tomorrow,” until *The Descendant* appeared. Only since her novel’s success has she taken the members of her own family into her confidence and showed the reams of written paper that testify to her youthful apprenticeship. There are odd bits of poetry—scrawled when the little hand was hardly steady enough to form the letters and when spelling was evidently still an uncertain science—short stories, sketches, and whole novels. But editors’ offices were never besieged by these manuscripts; they were laid away where she kept her private papers; and her career is perhaps unrivalled, certainly enviable, in that she has so far been asked to publish more than she was willing to.

Miss Glasgow is self-tutored, and independent as a thinker. She did not go to school as a child, because physical frailty forbade, and with but a little teaching from older sisters she conquered the usual beaten path of education alone and unaided.

As a little child she was an omnivorous reader, devouring, at ten years old, all of Scott’s novels, Hugo’s *Les Misérables*, and any book with a story to it that she could lay hands on. Fortunately she belonged to a bookish family, so that her opportuni-

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ties were many. By the time she was sixteen years old her mind seemed to have found its natural bent, and since then her studies have been wholly scientific and political.

With a rigid thoroughness and a complete self-absorption rare among women, she has followed in the steps of Spencer's *Synthetic Philosophy*, and has studied the works of Darwin, Mill, Huxley, Haeckel, Lubbock, Lyell, Romanes, Moleschott, Weissmann, Laing, and Grant Allen.

History and natural law are Miss Glasgow's studies, and man's real life, development or failure, is what she cares to write about. The romantic does not especially appeal to her, and the unreal, the sham poetic, she spurns; but there is no actual suffering of man or brute, no innate, insuperable weakness, no tragic combination of forces or circumstances under which man is downtrodden, for which she has not keen insight and a broad, tender sympathy which remind one of George Eliot. Her love of animals, her especial cherishings of forlorn dogs and sickly kittens, make one think, too, of what George Eliot writes of her own preference for friendless curs.

In the reviews of *The Descendant* Miss Glasgow's work has been frequently compared with *The African Farm*. It must have been the forceful writing and intensity of emotion in both books which suggested the resemblance, for the former writer does not share Miss Schreiner's love of the allegorical and supernatural. I find in the whole field of English literature but one writer who might be thought of as Miss Glasgow's prototype, and that is Emily Brontë. The "Last Lines," "The Old Stoic," and the stanzas beginning,

Often rebuked, yet always back
returning
To those first feelings that were born
with me,

might have come from Miss Glasgow's pen; there is in both these women somewhat of the same intellectual courage, singleness of purpose, and "more than manlike strength."

Just about in the centre of Richmond, on the very corner where the streets are divided into east and west, stands the old gray Colonial house where this young writer lives and works. It is a large, roomy house, and four daughters live at home. The fact of Miss Ellen Glasgow's writing was a secret, so that she had no study of her own. *The Descendant* was written in her bedroom and in the family sitting-room, and as the author pathetically relates, "I had to stop a dozen times in Michael's most exciting predicaments to see whether a certain flower looked better on the left or the right side of a hat."

The first deliberate acknowledgment of *The Descendant's* success was that the author's father assigned a small quiet room on the second floor for the future work to be done in. Here, under the window, stands the writing-desk, and on either side along the wall are bookcases full of scientific books and works on political economy, and the walls are literally covered with beautiful photographs brought home from England last summer.

Not long ago Miss Glasgow and two intimate friends sat up until long after midnight in this little study while the author read aloud her beautiful poem "In a Buddhist Temple," and after that numbers of short poems that have been accumulating for years were then heard for the first time.

"I know I am not a poet," Miss Glasgow says. "This is only a way of giving vent to the emotion of the moment." But some of these short poems are flawless, and all are forceful and spontaneous, seeming to be, as she says, "as easy as to feel." Well, art is but expression, and the seal of genius is

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[More information](#)

that expression should be as natural as living or thinking.

One criticism of the book that came as a great surprise to the author was that it was "sombre throughout." She had expected possible misunderstanding and disapproval of certain phases of it, and she was not astonished that the political economy was attacked; but she said very plaintively, "I did not know it was all sombre; I thought the conversations were rather light, even bright at times." But Miss Glasgow's outlook upon life is naturally a serious and grave one, and she does not wholly realize how deep the imprint upon the book was.

The editor of a Western daily paper made a severe attack upon the book upon the grounds that a "copy of Weissmann's *Heredity* lay upon the floor" in Akershem's room, and yet the author apparently believed in the transmission of acquired traits. Whether the book's being upon the floor was taken as a sign that it was the basis of the work, or whether the editor felt that no one having once read Weissmann could side with the more conservative scientists, was not explained. The author has been accused of being imbued with Schopenhauer, whom she knew not at all except from one or two casual essays. Indeed she has never concerned herself with speculative thought at all; but when she writes of tested science and verified history she feels the ground fairly firm under her feet.

One lady wrote from England to know why the hero had blinking eyes. I questioned the author seriously, for I too thought this a defect; but she answered, "Michael had blinking eyes; I could not help it; I have to write of my people as they are."

Miss Glasgow is now at work upon another novel of broader scope than *The Descendant*. The hero is a young scientist and the heroine a most vivid and bewitch-

ing personality, with less of genius than Rachel Gavin had, but with more vivacity and more varied talents.

Miss Glasgow has very remarkable ability, and great achievements lie before her. Those who know her best are certain that she is not a one-book author, and that *The Descendant* is only a first indication of her capacity. She is now only twenty-two years old, and her interest in study and mental energy insure a future of brilliant results. The first book excited unusual comment and controversy, and the fact that it did so is proof that it was thought-challenging. Perhaps the new book will solve some of the riddles its predecessor left unanswered.

Her care in writing, her felicity of expression, and the equipment she brings to her work, prepare us to expect much from one who has already made so favorable a beginning.

Independent, 49 (29 July 1897), 980

This is the story of miseries manifold. From its opening chapter the reader feels the inevitable outcome to be sodden tragedy. An illegitimate son of a rustic Virginia woman is the hero. His unfortunate origin stamps itself in his character. He goes to New York and becomes a socialist, lives in defiance of law with a young woman while editing a socialist newspaper. Falls in love with a girl in good standing in society, commits murder, goes to the penitentiary for eight years, comes out a wreck, and dies miserably. The book is vigorously written, with considerable show of dramatic power; but it leaves a nausea in the mind, and one feels the need of a liberal tonic. If it was written for a moral purpose it is a failure.