

Commencement Thesis.

Subject. Roman's Work in Literature.

Bertha O. Olson.

Subject. Woman's Work in Literature.

Characteristics of
Woman's work.

Increase.

Restriction.

Success.

Personal individuality.

Object.

Female Occupations.

Work during the days of Revolution.

Branch especially qualified for.

Literary work during the colonial period by
Woman.

Reasons for absence of college women from
literature.

First American Professional literary woman.

1. Difficulties of youth.

a. Ill health.

b. The schools.

The line along which women have worked
most successfully.

Disadvantages before the Civil War.

1. Lack of training.

2. Nature of public demand.

Some of the most noted women in American Literature.

1. Margaret Fuller.
2. Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Women in English Literature.

George Eliot.

Harriet Martineau.

Mrs. Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

Felicia Hemans.

Conclusion.

The increase in the number of female writers in this country has been very rapid. They restrict themselves with a very few exceptions to poetry and fiction. Roman's success in writing novels, stories and verses would seem to settle all doubts as to her ability to compete with man in the field of literature. She puts much of her personal individuality into her book, being more prone to express emotions than ideas, and she also risks more than a man. To most women, fame, except so far as it bears the character of sympathy, is more an annoyance than a pleasure. Fame is hardly her object in taking up the pen, and she is surprised and wounded by criticism on mere literary defects, having expected from the world in general, the indulgent sympathy which she has found among partial friends.

In many female writers is recognized an earnest and holy spirit and true aim, inconsistent with a petty love of display. The less absorbing

nature of female occupations is favorable to wanderings through the gardens of imagination and fancy. In seclusion, too, reflections and feelings spring up, that naturally seek expression. Thus taking into view the fine susceptibility and more ready sympathies of woman, which dispose her to find enjoyment in the creations of art, it is not surprising that the spirit and feeling of the times at different periods, should be reflected in her writings more than in those of men. In the dark days of the Revolution, female eloquence and satire aided the patriots; and, now, the brightest flowers of poetry are twined about the shrine of the domestic affections. Poetry always receives its tone from the prevalent temper of the period.

One branch of literary labor, in which women seem especially qualified, is the making of school books. It seems that as women are the earliest teachers of the young, they ought to know best the methods by which children may be led up to knowledge, and are better fitted

than men to prepare the text-books to be used in elementary studies.

The professional literary woman was unknown in the colonial period. She has but little to give us. The verses of Mrs. Anne Bradstreet were the fruit, but of some few hours stolen from her sleep and other refreshments.

There has been a great deal of argument caused by the absence of college women in literature, especially in fiction, but this has been very well answered by Mrs. May Miller. She says the average college girl lacks practical experience of life. It is natural that she should. A girl who has been always at school from childhood until she is twenty three or four years old has hardly begun to live. She is still a school-girl, with the world and its serious problems yet before her. She has also an incomplete knowledge of human nature. She is likely, therefore, to have less interest in persons and in the problems which confront them, than in her studies, and is less likely to

begin at once to write fiction, which deals largely with just those things. Self-consciousness in writing is not due so much to the careful training of the critical faculty, as to the insufficient training of this faculty.

Miss Hannah Adams born in Mass. in 1755, may be accepted as the first American woman who made literature her profession. The accounts of her life set forth clearly the difficulties which in her youth had to be dealt with by a woman seriously undertaking authorship. Ill health, which forbade her attending school, was an individual disadvantage. The country schools were defective because the girls learned only to write and cipher, and were in the summer instructed by females in reading, sewing and other kinds of work. All her life she labored against odds, learning, however, the rudiments of Latin, Greek, geography and logic, from some gentlemen boarding at her father's house.

The dispersive tendency of the time, before the Civil War, showed itself especially in the literary effort of women, and operated against the symmetrical, artistic development among women. Some of the causes were, first, the lack of training of girls. Efficient work, in literature as in other professions, is dependent in a degree upon preparation, not upon the actual amount of knowledge possessed, but upon the training of the mind to sure action and the vitality of the sparks of intellectual life communicated in early days. The second cause was the unsettled nature of the public demand. America was not quite sure what it was proper to expect of the female writer. On those days, it seemed to be held necessary for American women to work their way into literature by first compiling a cookery book. The third cause was the struggle between the art instinct and the desire for reform.

The special line along which women have worked most successfully is fiction. It is here that they have worked with the greatest vigor and freedom, and in that important class of fiction which reflects faithfully the national life, broadly or in sectional phases.

Margaret Fuller's equipment was superior to that of any American woman, who had previously entered the field of literature. She must be placed very high among the writing women of America. Her place in our literature is her own; it has not been filled, nor does it seem likely to be. She displays some healthy humor, though not as much as her charming letters indicate that she possessed.

The inborn powers of Mrs. Stowe were fortunately developed in a home atmosphere that supplied deficiencies in training. She was granted outside her inspiring home circle, an extra stimulus in the early influence of an enthusiastic teacher.

A close knowledge of Scott's novels from her girlhood had its effect in shaping her methods of narration. Residence for many years near the Ohio border had familiarized her with some of the darkest aspects of slavery, so that when the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law roused her to the task of exhibiting the system in operation, she was fully prepared to execute it. And she did. "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was a "shot heard round the world". Ten thousand copies were sold in a few days. Eight power presses were kept running day and night to supply the continual demand. Never did any American work have such success. It has done much to command respect for the faculties of woman. The influences, are broad and general which have since that day removed all restrictions tending to impress inferiority on the woman writer. Women, whatever their personal feelings in regard to the much discussed book, were enabled to hold the pen more firmly, to move it more freely.

In poetry there was also an equal development. In 1873 a critic recorded the opinion that there was more genius in the living female poets of America than in all their predecessors. There is a wider range of thought in their verse, and infinitely more art. The gains in poetry are partly due to the law of evolution working through the whole poetry, by the influence of sound models and of a truer criticism, and partly by the altered position of women in general. The poems of Mrs. Howe express true womanly aspirations, but their strongest characteristic is the fervent patriotism which breathes through the famous, "Battle Hymn of the Republic." The dramatic lyric poetry took new force and naturalness in the hands of Rose Terry Cooke. The poems of Edith M. Thomas with their exquisite workmanship, mark the high attainment of woman in the mastery of poetic form and exhale some breath of that fragrance which clings to the work of young Keats.

A modern writer says, In English literature there is hardly a department which woman does not adorn. In history, biography, poetry and fiction, she seems equally at home, presenting comprehensiveness, a grasp of deep and intricate questions, a delicacy and faithfulness of treatment, a logical force and clearness seldom equalled or surpassed by the stronger sex.

George Eliot has made an enduring fame through her novels, which are justly considered the best works of modern fiction. In girlhood she became a resident of London, where she pursued a systematic course of study, which manifests itself everywhere in her writings in a breadth and strength of thought which is characteristic more generally of the masculine mind. It is this which makes her novels more than the relation of incident. George Eliot's life was as fruitful as that of most men and as happy as any woman's could have been with her bent toward

pessimism and living under the peculiar social conditions which she had imposed upon herself. It has been said of her, that she was all genius and learning. George Eliot said, that as a rule women fail in producing works of the highest rank in literature. They lack no essential qualification for success, but physical stamina. The novels she wrote first are held superior as domestic literature, to the more elaborate and powerful works of her mature years. The fireside favorites are "Adam Bede" and "Mills on the Tross." The classic romances are "Romola" and "Daniel Deronda," standard novels full of rich and intellectual vigor, but demanding an equal breadth of understanding to enjoy them, and was not popular with the great class of people for whom it was difficult to understand.

We will now pass to another English author, Harriet Martineau. While possessing some noble traits of

character, such as earnestness, courage, and sincerity, she was self-willed and self-conscious. Nobody understood her, and she did not understand herself. She was extremely religious, not with the mind which is Christ Jesus, but with a certain fierce superstition which did more harm than good in the family circle. She was one of the most remarkable women of her time, and was courted by the world, she cared little about the hum of social gatherings, not only because of her deafness, but also that she had never been an amiable child, and could never be an accommodating woman.

Elizabeth Parret Browning, Mr. St. St. Story has said, "Her slight figure seemed hardly enough to contain the great heart which beat so fervently within, and the soul that expanded more and more as one year gave place to another. It was difficult to believe that such a fairy hand could pen words of such

ponderous weight. Her face and head almost lost themselves in the thick curls of her dark brown hair. Her character was purified by years of suffering. She wrote not from knowledge but from imagination. No writer approaching the eminence of Elizabeth Barrett Browning has been so little written about. From her weary couch and sleepless pillow emanated poems of the most exquisite beauty, and thoughts of the most marvellous brilliancy and power. In poetry Mrs. Browning and Felicia Hemans stand pre-eminent. Mrs. Hemans was the poet of the affections and of sentiment. Mrs. Browning wrote heroic epics and is acknowledged as the crowned queen of song. These women have given us the divinest strains of sorrow through their suffering souls.

Women seem equally at home in all the branches of literature, but they have done the most and the best work in fiction. They express their personal thoughts and feelings in their writings, which makes it more pleasant to read. Woman has worked under many difficulties but still has held a prominent place in literature and will hereafter. Some have made an enduring fame and will never be forgotten.