

George Eliot, the Queen of Fiction.

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This is an age of novelists. Each kind of literature has had its period of greatest prominence. All through history poetry has been the first to reappear after a period in which the literature has been suppressed. The drama, the essay, and religious writing each had their day, and poetry was hardly more prominent then than now. But, in the words of a writer, - "The novelist can stretch a wider canvas than the poet and on his palette he has a greater variety of pigments wherewith to produce his picture in its lights and glooms."

The year 1740 gave birth to the first novel, *Pamela*, written by Samuel Richardson. But not even in their dreams did a vision of the novel of to day ever cross the minds of the people of the early part of the eighteenth century. Henry Fielding and Tobias Smollett were writers of the same period, and these three early writers we class as the first great group of novelists.

With the Vicar of Wakefield in 1766. by Goldsmith, we find the novel in a different guise, for the Vicar of Wakefield was to the novel, what Wordsworth's poems were to the poetry of their day - descriptions of country life and scenes.

Toward the close of the eighteenth century we find the names of Holcroft and Godwin as the authors of political novels; Mrs Opie, domestic life; Miss Edgeworth, Irish stories; Miss Austen, English society. With the close of the century the ideal novel gave way to one of different nature known as the realistic which soon gained perfection, and increased in popularity up to the present day. It would seem that realism acted as an incentive, from the sudden advance and great improvement, for it is in this century that we find the group comprising the greatest of all novelists. Each excelled in his own way and it can hardly be said that one was greater than the other.

It seems remarkable that so many excellent writers were crowded in this short period of writing. No one writer has given his

name to this period, for the names of Scott, Thackeray, Dickens, and Eliot are as closely linked as the chapters of a story. Each writing in the same age their works are in many respects similar. The novels of Scott are pictures of the pastoral life of the Scotch. He loved especially to place his characters in positions of danger and then bring them safely out. Thackeray wrote of English society life, though many of his characters were historical, while Dickens' aim was to strike a blow at the degraded system of public institutions then in existence in England.

Like Dickens and Thackeray the scenes of George Eliot's novels, with the exception of *Romola*, were laid in England; like Scott's they were pictures of country life.

Many readers of George Eliot contend that her success in writing is due to her early surroundings.

Picture to yourself a beautiful old-fashioned farmhouse with ivy clambering over the walls, its green leaves giving it the appearance of freshness. Situated at some little distance from the road among

many trees that offer an inviting shade from the rays of the scorching sun.

The country surrounding is unbroken, the level prairie stretching away to the horizon. No railroads mar the beauty of the scene, and its monotony is broken only by the stage coach as twice each day it passes the house. Picture all this and more and you will see Giff House where our heroine spent twenty one years of her early life. Is it wonderful then that with such quiet beautiful surroundings and living almost in solitude, that an impression should be made on her mind, that would have a lasting influence on the life that was to follow?

Her early education she gained at boarding schools, having been placed at the first one when but five years of age. In her eighth year she was sent to Nuneaton to school. Her teacher Miss Lewes was a very religious woman and her associations with Mary Ann Evans, - for we must not forget that George Eliot is but an assumed name -

cast a great influence over her early life. When she was but seventeen years of age her mother died, and for thirteen years we find her keeping house for her father, and at his death she visited the Continent in company with Mr. and Mrs. Bray, with whom she had become fast friends. She remained abroad for some time carrying on her studies. After her return she made her home with the Brays until 1851 when she accepted the position of assistant editor of the Westminster Review. It is here that we find the beginning of her literary career. The loss of her mother when she was so young threw the entire care of the household on her shoulders and caused her early to feel the responsibilities of life, and perhaps in a great measure accounts for the depth and earnestness of thought so indelibly stamped upon all her writings.

It seems marvellous that this woman who in time became the queen of novelists, was at one time strongly

opposed to all kinds of fiction. She could not conceive how a person could be more interested in a fictitious character than in the deeds and words of a real human being. In her opinion history was in every way superior to the novel.

In 1854 although not legally married she became the wife of George Henry Lewes. He was a man of great literary ability, and aided her much in her work, indeed, it is thought by some that had it not been for this influence her excellent works would never have been written, while others who are especially prejudiced against her on account of this marriage, are of the opinion that it cast a shadow over her life that tinged all her works.

Her work is not alone confined to novel writing, as a part of it appears in the form of essays and poetry. But she will always be known, not as George Eliot, the essayist, or the poet, but as George Eliot the novelist.

It was the urgent desire of her husband

that she should write a book, and in 1856 she began her first attempt at fiction, which appeared in Blackwood's Magazine in the form of short stories. They were written of the clergy and entitled "Scenes of Clerical Life." The scenes met with such success at the hands of the publisher that she was encouraged to do other and better work and in 1859 Adam Bede her first novel was published. It is not only her first, but probably her best. Many of her characters were those of her own relatives and friends disguised fictitiously. For this work she received not only the admiration of an enthusiastic public, but also quite a sum of money from her publishers.

They paying her £800 for the privilege of publishing the book for four years. Many of the characters of the story were Methodists, - the interest of the plot centering about the Methodist preacher, Dinah Morris, the heroine of the story.

In 1860, "The Mill on the Floss," was published. Many instances in the life of our heroine are portrayed in this story.

Following this was *Silas Marner*, published in 1867 after which *Romola* appears in 1868.

The scene of this story is laid in Italy, and it is her only historical novel.

In the life of *Tito*, George Eliot pictures admirably to what depths of infamy, the love of money, of public admiration, and power, can lead men.

Felix Holt was published in 1866. In character this was a political novel, and showed especially well the different classes in political life, picturing English country people as only George Eliot can.

In 1868 she wrote her first and only drama, "*The Spanish Gypsy*". In 1871 *Middlemarch* was published and in 1874 a collection of her *Poems*.

In the year 1876 *Daniel Deronda* which is considered by many one of her best works was published. The scene opening reveals to our imagination an elegantly furnished gaming room, about the tables of which busily engrossed in that vilest of all things gambling, are gathered many ladies and gentlemen, not the lower classes as one would suppose

but, on the other hand the funniness, the nobility, in fact the very aristocracy of the kingdom. It is here that we find the heroine of our story, Gwendolin absorbed in the trickery of the game, the winner of the evening. But suddenly the spell is broken, she becomes conscious of the fact that some one is scrutinizing her. She glances up and her eyes meet those of Deronda, the hero, about whom the interest of the story centers. Her luck fails her. She no longer wins, but loses game after game, until she is out of patience with herself for allowing this entire stranger to make such an impression upon her as to cause her to lose her self control. On returning to her boarding place she finds a letter from her mother in which she tells her that a misfortune has befallen them, - they have lost all their money and that Gwendolin must return at once to their home, which will be with her uncle, who is to support them.

The early dawn of the following morning finds Gwendolin on her way to a

Jawn brokers, with a necklace which she pawned in order to obtain enough money to return home. Scarcely has she arrived at her boarding place and begun her preparations for the journey, when a knock is heard upon the door, and a servant announces a package for Miss Harleth.

She finds within, the necklace she had sold and knows that it must be the stranger of the day before who has returned it to her. She returns to her new home and it is here that our real story begins.

Tall, erect, beautiful, and a society girl, it is but natural that her uncle looks for her to make a brilliant marriage.

They have been living in their new home but a few months when Grandcourt appears in the parish. He is a wealthy gentleman, an heir to a baronetcy. He meets Gwendolin and after but a short acquaintance offers his hand to her in marriage. She is about to give her consent when she is made aware of the fact that Grandcourt is one of

the vilest of criminals, and is utterly without moral character. She resolves not to marry him, in spite of the wish of her relatives, to see the match, they, knowing nothing of his character. She goes quickly away from the place, Grandcourt knows not where. When she again returns she finds her mother almost in poverty. Grandcourt finds her again and urges his suit. Blinded by the promise of every thing that money can buy, and then mother relieved from her poverty stricken condition, she accepts. They are married and the misery of her life following cannot be described. She sees the folly of her marriage, too late; she sees Grandcourt's nature in its true light, a nature cold, selfish, almost inhuman, a nature that could not know love but on the other hand wished for a beautiful wife that he might command as a slave.

But we will leave Mr and Mrs. Grandcourt for a time and turn our attention to Deronda. One day while out boating he

noticed a young and beautiful Jewish girl about to drown herself. He rescues her, and takes her to a house near by, where he leaves her in care of friends. He learns from her, her story, - how she is fleeing from sorrow, and in hopes of finding her mother and brother, from whom she has long been separated. Despairing in her search she had determined to commit suicide but was discovered and rescued by Deronda. Mirah, for this is the name by which she was known lives with this kind friend Mrs. Meyrick, and gives lessons in the neighborhood. Deronda regards her with fond affection and does every thing for her comfort. Gwendolin is meanwhile living out her miserable life with Grandcourt. One day while out yachting Grandcourt attempts to fix the sail and by some mis-step falls overboard. He calls to Gwendolin to throw him this rope. She stands as one almost paralyzed, a terrible desire in her heart - to see Grandcourt drown. He sinks and again rises, calling for the rope. She

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still resists. He sinks for the last time, and still Gwendolin stands with the rope in her hand. A terrible thought now takes possession of her, - she is a murderer. During the days of fear and sorrow that follow Deronda is the kindest and best of friends to her, and Gwendolin begins to think a great deal of him.

Deronda while talking with some Jews in a store one day discovers that Mirah's brother lives in that city. He hunts him up and brother and sister are once more united.

Mirah's sweet beautiful nature has completely won the heart of Deronda. One thing seems to stand between them, the fact that Mirah is a Jewess. Deronda not knowing the circumstances of his birth had always had a fear of what it might be, but imagine his joy when he learned that he was by birth a Jew.

Nothing now stands between Deronda and Mirah, and they are soon married. This is a severe blow to Gwendolin, who in turn loves Deronda. And thus the story ends. We would class this

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story as a Jewish novel. It holds up the Jewish religion as if the writer herself might almost be a Jew.

One cannot help being fascinated with the beautiful character she has created, in Deronda. But her characters are all true to life. In Gwendolen we see a perfect type of a spoiled child expecting everyone to give up to her, as though she were the only person in the world, with a nature, too selfish for love for any one but herself. Her mother Mrs. Davilow, a perfect slave to her wishes would sacrifice any thing for her happiness.

Grandcourt's cold nature we have already spoken of. In this character is shown the wickedness and corruption existing in the higher circles of English society, as well as the ease in which it was hidden by riches.

If we would find fault with the story we would say the plot is rather loose, it seeming as though one could almost make two stories out

of the one. It is one of her most sober books, showing not even a tinge of her humorous nature. We often hear one say of George Eliot's novels, "They always have a bad or disagreeable ending." It is exactly this that makes her novels true to nature, for it is just the way we find it in human life, not all pleasure, and no pain and sorrow, as some novelists would have you believe.

In 1859 is published one of her most humorous productions, "The Impressions of Theophrastus Such" We find a few more short stories from her gifted pen and her literary career is ended.

In the spring of 1880 she married J. W. Cross and together they went abroad visiting in Europe until July. In the Autumn of the same year she died, after but a short illness.

Her novels are works of art and few writers have shown greater creative imagination. Whether historical, political

or directed against the evils of society, they were written for the good of humanity and have fulfilled their mission.

As a novelist she stands without a superior in the history of literature. As a woman novelist she has demonstrated beyond a question the ability of her sex in the field of fiction, receiving the love and admiration of an appreciative public.

Many have censured George Eliot the woman, but when her great work is examined with unprejudiced eyes when her noble character is fully understood admiration cannot be withheld. She has realized her heart's desire. "She has joined the choir invisible of those immortal dead who live again in minds made better by their presence".

No words more beautiful than her own could be used in describing the close of her life work.

"The sun had sunk, but music still was there And when this ceased still triumph filled the air."