

George Eliot - Her Work in Literature.

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Far away in England, in one of those rural districts where the quiet roads are bordered with hedgerows, and stately elms cast their shadows; where busy men, well kept farms, the red brick school-house, and the broad pastures speak of thrift and prosperity; and all suggests sweet repose alike to mind and eye, Marian Evans was born Nov. 22, 1819. She was destined to become the great English author, known to the world as George Eliot.

In thinking of her childhood days spent on a quiet farm, playing as all children play, away from the excitement of the world with nothing to break the monotony of each day, except the passing of the daily coach, for which she watched most eagerly, we have no thought of the wonderful future that was in store for her.

Born of respectable parents with a comfortable income, she was brought up accordingly. At an early age she was left motherless and was soon compelled to undertake the care of her father's household. She had always been a very serious child, not particularly bright in her studies but very thoughtful, always demanding a reason for everything.

Perhaps we can give you no better idea of her as a child than to quote her own words used

in describing Maggie in "The Mill on the Floss", which was no doubt a picture of herself: - "a creature full of eager passionate longings for all that was glad and beautiful; thirsty for all knowledge; with an ear straining after dreamy music that died away and would not come to her; with a blind unconscious yearning for something that would link life and give her soul a sense of home in it."

With such longings we do not wonder that she gained a world-wide reputation and won a place in the hearts of so many people. Her father gave her a good education. She knew how to improve her opportunities, and studied and worked hard. Her efforts resulted in a riper culture than that attained by any other English woman.

Her's was a nature full of love, one that continually craved love from those about her, and one subject to deep impressions. In her writings it is seen how forcibly the scenes of her childhood were imprinted on her mind. Their influences remained with her during life.

In all her earlier days, duty and inclination drew her in directly opposite directions, and her soul became worn and chafed by the perpetual struggle.

The chief interest in regard to her life is the records of her mind, for the outward events of her life were few.

She was not what one would call a pretty woman, that is, her features were not beautiful, but there was a beauty in her face born of power and spirituality. Her great soul shone out on her face and softened the harsh outlines, giving it a peculiar sweetness of expression. Think of her as described by me: - "A head, grand and massive, brow straight, nose drooped, jaw square, lips stern and under-cast but made beautiful by sweet smile and eyes" and you have the picture of George Eliot of whom such few portraits have been produced. She possessed a frail body but her large head with its masses of brown wavy hair attracted the attention immediately, and you wondered how such a small body could carry such a large head.

In studying her character it seems to me we could not find another more earnest, noble, strong, loving, such a deep yearning for truth, knowledge, and a desire to be useful in the world, with an entire forgetfulness of self. Her one great desire seemed to be to help mankind, and her

biting love for the suffering was almost Christ-like in its tenderness.

It seems that during her younger days she felt that she was little understood by those about her, and that a great energy within her was repressed. This repression she refers to in after life as follows:- "you may try but you can never imagine what it is to have a man's force of genius in you and yet to suffer the slavery of being a girl." Yet during all her life, with her masculine intellect she was the most womanly of women.

Very early in life she became possessed with the idea that she would be a great personage, and she tells how she used to play on the piano, of which she did not know one note, to impress the servants with the proper idea of her accomplishments. She was never contented with only a dim idea of things, she must understand them perfectly; whatever she did, it was with her whole heart.

In her younger days she was deeply religious. She thought it very wrong to go to operas and to read novels. She then had a very poor opinion of that class of literature in which she in after years gained such distinction. She

did not want to be only an ordinary christian, she desired to be sanctified wholly. She always loved to read the bible and to feel the deep glow of feeling that came from devotion which belonged to her nature. She was a woman who would not merely take the opinion of others on any subject, but she must know by her own experience if possible. Her ideas in regard to religion seemed to have entirely changed in later years. Though she was always religious, in her later years she left the doctrines and creeds of her earlier life. She was influenced by such of her friends as Makey, Lewis, and Herbert Spencer. Her books reveal the fact that she passed through deep religious troubles.

It is difficult to determine from her writings what her religious faith was, for she ~~suffered~~ ^{went} so deeply into the religious emotions of her characters that at one time it would seem that she might be a Roman Catholic, and at another a Protestant. The general idea of her readers is that she was the latter. Whatever may have been her religion we know that her idea of life was the highest and noblest. Her idea of a true life was to forget self and live

for those about her. It was said that she was humbly impressed with the principle of self-forgetfulness for the good of others, and the obligation of duty. She was not a woman who could "take things as they came" without feeling greatly her own responsibility. In youth she was much weighed down with the idea of sin about her.

Her life, before her marriage, and after her father's death, was spent in travelling for the purpose of studying; for a time she was employed as assistant editor of Westminster Review. Up to the time named she was a writer of reviews, translations, and also wrote some poetry.

Perhaps the great mistake of her life was her marriage with Mr. George Lewis, an act in which she defied the law. From what can be gathered from her letters and journal, her conscience was perfectly at ease in regard to it, nor did she seem to care what the public might say or think. However it is most probable that she would have remained the brilliant reviewer or accurate translator had it not been for the helpful sympathy of Mr. Lewis during their married life. Strange to

say, with all her force of genius and strength of mind, she had little self confidence in regard to her literary work. She was always most fearful of the results, and was very easily discouraged. She was much given to fits of despondency, especially after the completion of a book. Perhaps this may have been due largely to her ill health. She had a weak constitution, and was much troubled with headaches, rheumatism, and dyspepsia. She was seldom free from headaches, and in reading her books one feels they are following the life of an invalid.

But it was her noble soul that broke through all these difficulties and overcame them. She might have done like many of her weak sisters, lived a life of idleness, fearing always that any activity would bring on some of her troubles.

She possessed a serious, somewhat somber nature, which seemed to be in contact with a bright and pleasant one. Beyond what can be gathered from her letters and journals, Mr Lewis was a bright kind loving man of pleasing manners. In him she had a strong arm to lean upon in the business of life which she was physically unable to perform alone, and her serious

nature received cheerfulness from his vivacity and cheer.

During all their life together he shielded her carefully from the cruel criticisms of her works that appeared in print, allowing her to see only those that he new would not discourage her.

Living as she did, very much away from public life because of her ill health and a natural shrinking from the public eye, she had no way of judging the worlds opinion of her works excepting through the public press and private letters.

She always read her manuscripts to Mr. Lewis before they were sent to print, and his criticism was passed and received on them; doubtless her best books would never have been written without his counsel and encouragement, which was always given in the most loving manner.

From her journals their life together was one long dream of happiness, love, and devotion. She loved his children, of whom he had two, and for several years she labored with him to support his former wife, which he was compelled to do.

His character received a stability from her,

which it lacked, and she made a home for him in which he could pursue his literary work better than before. So we cannot judge how great a mistake this step may have been, or if it was not best as it was. On his death she made this entry in her diary, "Here I and sorrow sit alone."

As was said before, she was noted principally as a novelist. We would class her novels among the socialistic. She possessed the combination of a deep speculative power with a great and realistic imagination. She observed life as it really existed among a natural straight-forward people, and exhibits a very broad range in her observation of life.

One characteristic of her works is their completeness. While one reads he is not suspended in a dream while his brain is asleep, but his heart beats with fervor and he is thoroughly aware of the great issues of life and death. As one has said, "The granite-like foundation of the whole is the conscious moral perception and moral will. Other writers of fiction center our enjoyment and pain in the happiness and unhappiness of the chief actors."

It is said that in reading her books the char-

acter we admire most is her second self. They reveal a noble character, strength and breadth of mind, and a nature that has gone through strife and conquest conqueror, behind them all. So we cannot say with confidence that her creations are a projection of herself; she has put herself in their place, felt her characters, and made their experiences and feelings her own so that they seem but a reflection of herself.

She feels deeply the joys and sorrows of others and enters deeply into their emotions, thus making the reader feel with her. Her books reach the hearts of people because they are so true to nature. One feels that there are just such people with just such experiences in the world, living ~~day~~ ^{on} one's side.

Her first book, Adam Bede, was published in 1856, which took the world by storm, but which discouraged herself. After the completion of each book she felt great dissension and depression, feeling that she could never again give anything worth reading to the public. For its scenes she drew ^{upon} her early life and its surroundings.

In Middlemarch, Florence and Cecilia show the relation between herself and her sister, in all probability.

Romolo was the novel which most taxed her energies, both of mind and body. She said she began it a young woman and finished it an old one.

She looked far beyond the external joys and sorrows. Death to her was always tragic, but it was something more than the cessation of breath and pulse, it was the extinction of a soul. The marriage joys were dear to her but she saw something higher than the highest happiness of lovers. In "Adam Bede" she said of Adam and Eve as they stood with clasped hands, "What greater thing is there for two human souls than to feel that they are joined for life to strengthen each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories at the moment of last parting".

The great desire of her heart and the object of her writing was expressed in the following words on reading a criticism on one of her stories, "Clerical Scenes," "I wonder how I shall feel about these little details ten years from hence if I am living. At present I value them as grounds for hoping that my writing may succeed and so give value to my life; as in-

dications that I can touch the hearts of my fellow men and so sprinkle some precious grains as the result of the long years in which I have been in exert and suffering. But at present fear and trembling still prevail over hope."

Among others, she had a copy of "Scenes of a Clerical Life" sent to Dickens and Frode. Their delight was almost beyond expression. But supposing from the name of the author, George Eliot, they were writing to a gentleman, they addressed her as "Dear Sir". Dickens, however, was not fully assured as to the sex of the author, and said in his reply that having observed touches of such womanly grace in it, if they originated with no woman no man ever before had the art of making himself mentally so like a woman.

Others thought the author must be a churchman or a layman. Mrs. Carlyle said, "It is a book written out of the heart of a living man, not merely out of the brain of a living author." Others declared it could not have been written by a woman.

Although George Eliot wrote with continual fear and trembling, success was hers. With the intense desire to make the world better,

stronger, and nobler, with a strong mind, always intent on doing her very best she could not help but succeed, and through George Eliot fiction found its true place in literature.